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Christmas Double Number. 2D.

No. 781. Week Ending December 19th, 1903.

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SHORT STORIES
CHRISTMAS NUMBER

No 781. Week ending December 19th, 1903 Price Twopence.

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SPLENDID NEW SERIAL STARTS IN THIS NUMBER.

Dupes of Destiny

LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT

By Blanche Fardley, Writer of "The Bond Between."

PROLOGUE.

I.

The Man and His Inheritance.

Outside the grimy buildings in Walbrook, devoted solely to chambers for solicitors and other professional men, a hansom pulled up at No. 32, where a brass plate notified that "Messrs. Samuel Sharpe and Quirke, solicitors and commissioners of oaths" were to be found on the fourth floor.

A youth sprang out of the hansom on to the kerb, and a pretty typine hurrying past, turned to look at him again. He was tall and lithely built, and the face the girl had noticed was worth a second glance even in the busy thoroughfare of Walbrook. His skin was pale and innocent of hair, almost effeminate in its delicacy, and the broad white brow, with a suspicion of crisp yellow curls showing under the shabby sombrero, together with the straight, classic nose, and beautifully moulded mouth and chin made up a whole both rare and pleasing. A captious critic might have said that the merry gleam in the blue eyes had a trick of losing itself in a flash of steel-like rapidity, and that behind the frank, ingenious smile there lurked a snarl ready at the least provocation to startle the person who provoked it. But the pretty typine was no physiognomist, and she admired the handsome face of the boy in the shabby clothes.

In the meantime the boy on the kerb had taken a handful of money from his pocket, and picking out a bright two-shilling piece, gave it to the waiting Jehu.

"Here you are, cabby," he said, with a brilliant smile; "a bob over your fare."

The man grinned and touched his cap. "Thank'ee, sir. Good luck and good day to 'ee, sir!"

As he went with light, springy steps up the narrow, carpetless stairs that led to Messrs. Sharpe and Quirke's, the shabby stranger laughed softly: "I'm glad I got rid of that piece of money! It would never do for 'Sir' Cyprian Rust to pass spurious coin of the realm! And I'm almost certain it's all right now! These old rotters have had their six months for investigations. They would have written had they heard anything."

He turned the handle of the door that led into the outer office. "Now to make assurance doubly sure."

Immediately he entered he was taken into the private room of Mr. Sharpe, the senior partner, who greeted him suavely, apparently oblivious to the down-at-heel appearance of his client.

"You are up to time, Mr. Rust," he said, a slight smile touching his lips.

The young man laughed pleasantly. "I always am, Mr. Sharpe, where there is money to be gained! If you knew the hand-to-mouth existence I have been leading these last six months, waiting for this blessed will to be proved, and you to satisfy yourself that there is no grandson living to claim my uncle's title and money, you would understand a little of my impatience. For I am honestly eager to know the best or the worst," he went on passionately; "I'm not a hypocrite to pretend to hate money; I don't; and what's more, I want it badly—jolly badly!"

Mr. Sharpe nodded thoughtfully. The boyish outburst was natural, he thought, uncertainty in a position that may either mean poverty or riches is enough to try the patience of most men.

"So painting is not a success, then?" he said, busying himself with a bundle of blue documents as he spoke.

Cyprian Rust shrugged his shoulders. His eyes were following the movements of the older man with idle curiosity.

"Hardly," he answered, with a short laugh. "Art with money at your back is a beautiful vocation, but without the means of providing the necessary equipments such as a studio and models—to say nothing of paints—a crossing sweeper's work is preferable."

Mr. Sharpe smiled sympathetically.

"And you have no other way open to you to earn your living?"

The fair, boyish face flushed warmly, and from his blue eyes

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there flamed one of those rare flashes that would have startled Mr. Sharpe had he seen it.

"I have no other profession open to me," he answered curtly; "and I suppose all these questions are a prelude to telling me that I may disabuse my mind of the idea of inheriting this money? Out with it!" he laughed bitterly. "I have had too many knock-down blows to feel it—much! Has the precious kid turned up?"

Mr. Sharpe, the family solicitor for many years to the late Sir Basil Wingate, rose with slow dignity, and, drawing his chair back from the table, said:

"You will remember, Mr. Rust, at the reading of the will, the title, which by special remainder he had power to dispose of, and the money were left by Sir Basil Wingate to the elder son of his run-away only daughter, Helen Jerningham, *should* she have one; and failing a son being born to her, the title and the money *with* the estate, should go to you, his nephew; afterwards to *your* son—should you marry, or to the *son* of your daughter; no child of the feminine sex directly inheriting it."

"Yes," Cyprian Rust said impatiently. "I know all that jargon. Why worry me with it now? If I'm not to have it, then I'm indifferent to the whole concern."

"One moment, Mr. Rust," continued the dispassionate voice of the solicitor. "During the six months that have intervened between the reading of the will and the proving of it, I have searched high and low for news of Mrs. Jerningham. It is two years since she ran away, and hearing she went to Australia, I had advertisements inserted in all the Australian papers requesting her to communicate with us in the event of her having a male child, and I sent advertisements to the American papers also, with the result that——"

He stopped suddenly, startled by the almost deathly pallor of the young artist's face. It was bloodless, even to his lips, and his eyes were black with the intensity of his suppressed emotion.

"Go on, for Heaven's sake, man, tell me the worst!" he breathed hoarsely.

Mr. Sharpe drew himself up; he was not accustomed to such language.

"With the result," he continued, "that the will being proved, and no claim being set up against it, I have much pleasure in congratulating you upon your good fortune, Sir Cyprian."

For a moment the room danced before the eyes of the late Sir Basil Wingate's nephew, and he fell into a chair, burying his face in his hands.

Sir Cyprian! Sir Cyprian Rust, and owner of unlimited wealth! It was too good to be true, in spite of his boast that there could be no other result. His relief at the news showed him how unwarranted had been his assurance before.

"Are you quite certain," he said anxiously, "that it is all right? Suppose—afterwards—a son of Helen Jerningham turned up, what then?"

The solicitor shrugged his shoulders. "Then, Sir Cyprian, after due inquiries and proving the authenticity of legal documents, you would go back to your former position in life! But you need have no fear of being sent back to poverty," he said, noting the strained look about the boy's mouth; "your position is impregnable—absolutely assured; for if the poor lady had been living she would have seen one of those advertisements."

Sir Cyprian Rust breathed deeply; then a tremulous laugh rose to his lips. "I am still a beggar, Sharpe. I don't possess a red cent in spite of my new honours! Can I touch you for an advance? I must rig myself up decently. I shall not believe it is true until I am wearing some garments that have not come from a 'reach-me-down' shop!"

"Certainly, Sir Cyprian," said the old solicitor graciously. "I will give you notes for one hundred pounds. That will do to go on with, until you get your cheque-book from the bank. And I trust," he added pompously, "that as we understand the entire working of the property, you will retain us as your solicitors?"

The youngm an laughed. "Certainly, Sharpe. You shall have no cause to complain! But, buck up with that money, there's a good chap!"

At that moment the office boy put his head in at the door.

"Please, sir, you are wanted at the telephone," and with an excuse Mr. Sharpe left Sir Cyprian Rust alone in his private room.

He walked up and down the narrow little office with quick, impatient steps, planning his life anew, and arranging the cutting away of awkward associates. Once he shook his handsome head and smiled slightly. "No, I won't throw *that* up. It is too exciting, and my blood needs the stimulant the uncertainty gives! Only I will be more careful! My position demands it—now!"

The door re-opened to admit not the solicitor, but the office boy, who placed several letters on the desk and retired.

Moved by an idle impulse the young man turned them over curiously; then, suddenly his face grew livid, and he stifled an exclamation by biting his nether lip savagely.

The letter that had caused his discomfiture was a dirty-looking envelope, but the writing was that of someone he had begun to hope dead, since she stood between him and a fortune. It was that of Helen Jerningham, his cousin, and Sir Basil's once-loved daughter.

Fascinated and shivering as though with ague, he examined the postmark. She was not in England then! For it was the Sydney stamp on the envelope. Why was she writing? Suppose it was to announce the birth of a son and heir! Then once more he, Cyprian Rust, would be the penniless Bohemian artist, obscure and uncourted; while, if the letter failed to reach the man for whom it was intended, then he would be safe, and could watch that no others followed it!

A step outside decided him. He grasped the letter, and had just time to conceal it in his waistcoat pocket, when Mr. Sharpe returned.

He was too pre-occupied to notice that the new baronet's hand was trembling, or that his hairless upper lip was moist and twitching.

A few moments later, with bank notes to the value of a hundred pounds in his pocket, the new Sir Cyprian Rust found himself in the street once more. Seeking the nearest public house, he entered and had a glass of neat brandy, which he drained quickly.

That night, over a cigarette, and clad in immaculate evening dress in a private room at the Hotel Cecil, he drew from his pocket the letter that might have dealt the death blow to his ambition. He opened it and read:

DEAR MR. SHARPE—*I have seen your advertisement in the* Sydney Herald, *and am coming to England shortly, in order that the future heir—if a boy—to the title and property of my dear late father, Sir Basil Wingate, may be born in his own country. I am very poor, having left my husband, and if you could send my fare to London, c/o. the General Post Office, Plymouth, to meet me, I shall be able to call and see you, as, of course, you will be the trustee for my child. Hoping to hear from you, as I shall not write again,*

I am,
Faithfully yours,
HELEN JERNINGHAM.

That was all; but the new baronet shivered over his wine, as he realised the result this letter would have had upon the words Mr. Sharpe had spoken to him that morning. The letter was dated nearly two months back; then the heir—if there was one—would soon be in England!

"It was touch-and-go with Fate this morning!" he muttered. "Had old Sharpe not gone out of the room I could not have seen this! Then——"

He rose, and taking a match, struck it, then held the letter over the flame.

"I am afraid my dear cousin Helen will not find that money waiting at Plymouth," he said slowly as he carefully dusted away the ashes of what had once been another man's letter, "but I will make it my duty to watch every liner that comes to Plymouth from now."

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He glanced at his reflection in the glass, and smiled as he saw how much better he looked in his present attire than in the careless Bohemian dress of the morning.

But his laughing, brilliant eyes grew dark as he muttered: "Sir Cyprian, you hold the cards now! It rests with you to keep them!"

II.

The Broken Sentence.

THE woman moved her head and opened her eyes wearily. The hot air in the close-smelling little cabin barely moved the loose hair on her brow. The third-class passengers of the home-coming liner were as usual crowded out, and the narrow cabin where the woman lay, held three bunks.

"Now, my good woman," said the kindly, brusque voice of the ship's doctor, "you must not look about and mope. There are two strapping boys waiting to be introduced."

The woman pushed back the heavy strands of black hair, and said in a curiously breathless voice:

"Boys! Boys! Tell me—is it true? Then has my prayer been answered?"

The doctor looked at her sharply. In spite of her common, poor clothing, and want of money, he knew at once that the woman with the great, eager eyes and hollow cheeks, was a gentlewoman whom Fate had dealt hardly by.

"Yes, yes, that's it—boys," he said in a more gentle tone. "Now you must go to sleep, Mrs.——?" He glanced at her left hand, and experienced a curious sensation of personal disappointment at seeing that it was ringless.

"Never mind my name," the woman muttered, her pale face flushing, and her eyes glittering feverishly. "My boys—will they live? The truth—as God is your witness! Will they live?"

"They will," the doctor replied gravely.

The woman's answer was a strange one. She fell back on the tiny pillow with a sigh. "Then I shall die in peace!"

Wondering greatly, but fearing to excite her by further conversation, the doctor slipped outside into another cabin, where a kindly-hearted passenger was playing the *rôle* of nurse to the tiny atoms of humanity to which the lonely creature next door was mother.

"They are flourishing," he said curtly, glancing at the bundles of flannel from which strange noises came forth, "but I am afraid"—and he jerked his head in the direction of the cabin—"that *she* will go. She only seems to have lived with the desire to give life to these boys. That done, she is content to die! Did she tell you her name?"

The eyes of the homely creature filled slowly with tears. "No, sir, she's very close. 'Ardly spoke to anyone, and she's not one that you can ask questions of. There's something that stops you."

The doctor agreed, and after another glance at the mother in the adjoining cabin, returned to his companions on the promenade deck.

In the meantime the woman acting as nurse put the infants to sleep in a berth, then stole softly to the side of the mother. She listened to her breathing with a strange fear, for the marble-like face had the impression of death on it. Suddenly the large dark eyes opened, and, reading their expression rightly, the woman bent close over the bunk.

"Yes, dearie," she said soothingly, "they are all right; sleeping for all the world as though they had been brought up to it as a profession. Don't take on so!"

The pallid lips moved, and the kindly creature bent lower still.

"Boys' certificates of birth! I—want—the—doctor!"

Hurriedly the doctor was sent for, and left the smoking-saloon at once.

The eyes of the dying woman brightened as they fell upon him.

"What can I do?" he said gently. "Don't be afraid—tell me!"

"Certificates—of—birth!" The words came painfully. The doctor nodded encouragingly.

"That will be done. What name—what surname?"

She moved her head restlessly. "Send certificates—the elder is—the—future—Sir——" Her voice faltered, and the doctor saw that her mind was beginning to ramble.

"Yes," he said earnestly. "The certificates shall be sent anywhere you like, but they cannot be properly christened unless you give me their names—the surname—the name of their father."

She started up with a cry of terror. "No, no! He was cruel—not his name—put that of my father instead on the certificates, and send them to Mr.——" She paused. "I can't remember—but—he—is—in—London. He knows about, them—he—has—the—will—the—heir——" Her voice trailed off into a moan.

The doctor looked at the passenger who had taken care of the babies. "Cannot you rouse her?" he whispered. "If this poor girl has anything on her mind to right these children we must get the name of the father, or someone."

"Dearie," said the woman, leaning over the figure on the bunk, "tell us the name of the gentleman or lady who's to 'ave the babies."

The weary eyes opened. "I'm sorry, father! Forgive me! You were right—I was wrong! But the boys—the heir—the old place!"

The doctor sighed hopelessly. He was watching a secret being buried in a grave.

"The name! The name!" he said desperately.

A tender smile broke over the face of the woman.

"I remember," she murmured. "The solicitor's name was Samuel——" she stopped again, and a grey pallor spread imperceptibly over her face.

"The boys' name! For their sakes! The boys' sakes! The name of their father!" he said earnestly.

"For their sakes!" she murmured softly. "His name is—Jer—Jer——" Then she paused once more, and the doctor, bending over her, knew that she had died with the unfinished half of her sons' name on her lips.

FIRST CHAPTER.

Marcella.

"Is my father in, Wermen?"

"Yes, miss, but he does not wish to be disturbed," answered the low-voiced servant respectfully.

"Is he in his study?" the girl said quickly.

"No, miss, in the studio," and the man left the room as noiselessly as he had entered it.

Marcella Rust sighed wearily. Her father, to whom she had returned from the convent in Brussels, where she had spent her childhood, and the first few years of her girlhood, was as much a stranger to her now as in the days when she had heard his name on the occasion when the Mother Superior had sent for her to receive his annual letter.

It was their first Christmas Eve together since she had returned home for "good," and she could not help wondering sorely why her father preferred to shut himself up in his studio—that mysterious room he allowed no one to enter save his valet, Deacon.

"He might have stayed with me on Christmas Eve," she mused. "This large, gloomy house is a like palace under the sea! So lonely, dark, and forbidding! And he won't have any of my friends to stay with me! He seems to hate people!"

But Marcella Rust was not the type of girl to mope because her father was unsociable. She was young—just twenty-one—with a tall, graceful figure, set off by a face that was beyond

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the usual type of prettiness, being too intense and full of character to please the passer-by, yet the glowing, soft brown eyes, with their black lashes, and the rich, brown hair, waving rebelliously about her creamy brow and neck, were beautiful things to look upon. Her mouth, a trifle large for strict beauty, was vivid and sensitive, grave in repose, but the instant she spoke it dimpled at the corners, and revealed two even rows of milk-white teeth, while her short, straight nose, with its fine nostrils, indicated a nature both proud and noble.

Such was Marcella Rust, the only child of Sir Cyprian Rust, the rich man who spurned the world and all its vanities,

Marcella uttered a cry of amazement. The object the mysterious man had hidden was a spade guinea!

to revel in the delights of his hobby, that of collecting rare paintings, tapestries, china, and jewels, to say nothing of being a connoisseur in art as well.

Marcella rose, and, after gazing out upon the world of snow, turned away from the window with a laugh.

"Well, as I am alone, I may as well find something to do. I have not seen half the rooms in this rambling old house. I will begin a tour of investigation."

Another strange freak of her father's was to have as few servants as possible at the Court, so Marcella went down corridors, up flights of winding stairs, and into rooms that had long lain under the seal of dust. She looked about puzzled. The wing to which she had been lucky enough to find the key was absolutely going to rack and ruin for want of habitation. And yet it faced a south aspect, and the rooms were larger and more modern than those now used.

She was about to leave the corridor when a door at the extreme end opened, and her father's valet, Deacon, came out breathlessly, as though having run up a flight of stairs, looking pale and astonished when he saw the tall figure of his master's daughter.

"What room is that, Deacon?" Marcella said. "I did not know these were the servants' quarters."

"No, Miss, they are not," the man replied civilly, breathing quickly. "This is a lumber room."

"A lumber room?" Marcella said, puzzled, noticing the man's sudden discomfiture. "What lumber room? Let me see!" and she took a step towards the door, but quickly it was slammed to, and Deacon barred the way.

"I'm afraid, Miss," he said apologetically, "that you must not go in. It is not the kind of room Sir Cyprian would like you to be in."

"Not like me to be in?" she repeated in angry surprise. "What nonsense is this, Deacon? A lumber room is no curiosity to me. Why should not see this one?"

"It is full of dust, for one thing, Miss," the servant replied, civilly, "it would ruin your skirt for you."

Marcella looked at the feet of her father's valet. They were clad in shining, black patent slippers; both they and the bottoms of the man's trousers were innocent of dust!

"Really," she said slowly, "you must take great care to keep your own feet out of the dust, Deacon!"

A shadowy smile flitted across the man's mouth. "I know where to put them, Miss! Sir Cyprian's orders are that no one goes into that lumber room but myself."

"It is not my intention to bandy words with my father's servant!" Marcella said coldly, moving away; "but I shall certainly see the inside of that room soon, Deacon. My father's orders to the servants do not include me!"

As she strolled haughtily away, the valet smiled oilily. "I think they do, Miss!" he muttered; "more than anyone else!"

When Marcella, still burning with indignation, regained that portion of the Court to which she was accustomed, she heard voices as she was crossing the hall.

"Sir Cyprian is engaged, sir," Wermen was saying.

"Tell Sir Cyprian that I will not keep him very long," said the other voice, also a man's; and Marcella recognised, with a quickening of her pulses, the voice of the now, interesting curate of the parish church, who, in spite of being a recent comer, and with no rich relatives in the church to secure a living for him, was thought nearly as much of by the parish as her father who had rebuilt half the village, as well as given a new organ to the church.

"I'm sorry, sir," Wermen said firmly. "Sir Cyprian would not be disturbed for the world! They are his orders."

The curate hesitated. He seemed curiously loth to leave the Court without accomplishing his errand.

"Is—is Miss Rust at home?" he said, after a pause.

"Miss Rust is engaged, sir. I—can give a message for you."

Marcella stepped forward. It was intolerable that these horrid servants of her father's should have been trained

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to lie so callously, and to a clergyman, too! Ever since she had been home she had heard nothing but "Sir Cyprian's orders"!

"I will see Mr. Nullius, Wermen," she said, in a clear, high voice; "and when next you undertake to make a statement about me, please see that it is the truth. *I* am the mistress here, and receive whom I like. You may show Mr. Nullius into the drawing-room, and bring tea."

When, a few seconds later, Wermen ushered the curate into the presence of the strong-minded young mistress of Wingate Court, his face was impassive, but when he closed the door he chuckled softly, as though tickled by a subtle joke:

"There is going to be a tug-of-war here, now she's come. It did me good to hear her speak up. It was like old times when the mistress first started having her own way. But she soon stopped; the master's will beat hers, and she went out for sheer want of spirit! But this one"—he chuckled again—"there's something about her that won't be easy to break!"

SECOND CHAPTER.

"The Son of No One."

In the meantime, ignorant of the old man-servant's eulogy in her favour, Marcella was greeting the tall, athletic-looking curate, whose lean, strong face was lit by a smile of amusement that for a brief moment relieved his classic mouth of its usual expression of stern harshness, and lit his dark, grey eyes with a sudden laugh. Marcella thought, inconsequently, how that flash of youth changed him from a sad, over-worked curate into a strangely handsome man.

"Well done, Miss Rust!" he said, in a deep, musical voice; "your method of subduing the Philistines was primitive but effective."

Marcella laughed. "Yes, my father has so centred his thoughts round his works of art in his studio, that the servants have had nearly everything their own way! But you came to see him on important business, did you not?"

Her words had the unintentional effect of reminding the curate that he was in the presence of the daughter of the richest man in the county, and that he was only in her drawing-room on sufferance, as the bearer of a message, not as a friend.

"Yes," he replied, relapsing into his clerical manner. "A poor woman recently come to the parish, is ill, and I was called to see her this afternoon, as dangerous symptoms were developing; and when I got there, I found her in a very excited condition. She is an Australian, I believe, and once might have been very handsome, but disease and want have played havoc with her. I tried to comfort her, but she kept asking to see the owner of the Court, so I naturally thought Sir Cyprian would like to know."

"Naturally," Marcella answered. "What is her name?"

"I am not sure," he replied. "Mrs. 'Graves' or 'Grey.' But I promised to let the owner of the Court know that she wanted to see him. Perhaps," he added, "Sir Cyprian would go round this evening? She is at 14 Digges Row, with Mrs. Samson."

"I will tell him," she said thoughtfully. She was wondering what a woman in such a place as Digges Row could have to say to her retiring and fastidious father.

She looked up and caught a glance from the curate's dark, glowing eyes, that for some unaccountable reason made her heart flutter strangely; and she plunged into the conversation with the first question that came into her head.

"You must have felt very lonely coming to Crawley from London, Mr. Nullius. To leave a large city, full of life, for this village, and, perhaps," she added shyly, "a bright home full of brothers and sisters, for dull lodgings."

The curate's face flushed, then paled.

"On the contrary, Miss Rust," he said, in a low, sad voice, "I have only exchanged a lesser loneliness for a greater! I have never had a home, nor brothers and sisters. I"—and his voice trembled slightly—"I was brought up in the Foundling Hospital, and from there the kindly notice of an old clergyman rescued me, and got me into St. Paul's School, where I was lucky enough to win one or two scholarships, and so went to Oxford, where I took my degree. I have lived alone—even my name illustrates my isolation"—he laughed, a bitter inflection in his voice. "It was originally 'Filius Nullius,' the son of no one, now corrupted to Philip Nullius!"

"Filius Nullius," she murmured. "It has an attractive sound! Why, Mr. Nullius," she cried, "in the days of Nero that name might have belonged to a Roman noble—or even 'a king in Babylon,'" she quoted softly. Then, moved by an impulsive fancy, she reached out her hand to him. "I am also lonely," she said; "more so, because I have no interests to take me away from my loneliness. Let us be friends, Mr. Nullius."

The curate took her hand in his very gently.

"Thank you, Miss Rust," he said simply. "I am grateful. Yours is the first hand held out to me in friendship. And even were it only pity I would clutch it gladly. Now I must be going," he said, in a changed voice. "I have a lot to do. You won't forget to ask Sir Cyprian if he can manage to visit the poor soul, will you?"

With a lingering contact of hands he took his leave, and the eyes of Sir Cyprian Rust's daughter gazed after him wistfully.

"Pity," she whispered softly, "is akin to——" Then with a sudden blush, she turned to leave the room. "I had better find father, and give him that message; I won't trust it to a servant."

She ran lightly upstairs, and as she paused outside the door of the forbidden corridor, a man came suddenly out. He had black hair, beard, and moustache, and the dim glimmer of light in the unused corridor showed him to be a man of tall, well-made proportions.

Marcella shrank back into the shadow of a welcome corner. Her first impulse had been to scream, but she suppressed the desire and steadily watched the man. His movements were peculiar. He looked back quickly down the passage that led to the door to which her father's valet, Deacon, had refused her admittance earlier, and then taking something from his pocket, he stooped and placed it under the mat that lay at his feet, then, shutting the door, he locked it, put the key in his pocket, and had vanished before Marcella had recovered her presence of mind to follow him and raise an alarm. She had never seen the man before, of that she was certain, and yet there was that in his manner strangely familiar. His obvious knowledge of the complicated passages and the exit, together with his calm pocketing of the key of the door of the corridor, proved that he had been in the house before.

Marcella waited until the corridor was in silence, then slipping from her hiding-place, she raised the rug in front of the door the strange man had locked, and picked up the secret thing he had concealed. It felt like a sovereign, but it was too dark to make it out; so she hurried to her room, enjoying the uncommon sensation of excitement within the dull walls of the Court, and switching on the electric light, she turned over the coin in her hand curiously. It was a piece of gold to the value of twenty-one shillings, that had long since become obsolete among the current coin of the Realm, having on one side the head of the King, then George III., and on the reverse side a spade-formed shield, with the coat-of-arms. Marcella uttered a cry of amazement.

"A spade guinea! How odd! And what could that strange man have meant by putting it under the mat?"

Then she slipped it into the jewelled bag at her waist, and began to dress thoughtfully for dinner.

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THIRD CHAPTER.

Sir Cyprian's Appointment.

"Father," Marcella said, that night at dinner, "who is that dark man I saw coming out of the forbidden corridor this evening?"

Sir Cyprian Rust raised his calm blue eyes and glanced down the length of the dining-table ablaze with silver épergnes, and costly Christmas roses, interspersed here and there by glittering fairy-lamps in the shape of pink and yellow butterflies, while tall wax candles, standing in massive silver candelabras, lent a softened old-world tint to the dazzling effect of modern luxury.

But Sir Cyprian was not regarding the display of wealth on the dinner-table, he was accustomed to that; the years had made him callous to what had at first been a continual feast of beauty to him. He looked instead at the radiant, uncommon beauty of his daughter, who, in her dark, vivid personality, was the extreme antithesis to her father's pale golden hair and fresh complexion.

"My dear Marcella," he said, in soft, conventional tones of surprise; "what a strange question! Allow me to answer it by putting another. What 'dark man,' and why 'forbidden corridor'?"

Marcella's answer was like her nature—straight and to the point.

"He was very dark," she said. "Hair, beard, and moustache inky black; though it was not so much his appearance that I noticed as his manner, and a secret sort of air about him made me wonder what he could be doing alone outside the door of the corridor leading to an end room to which your valet denied me admittance this afternoon!"

Sir Cyprian laughed, and his laugh was very musical and pleasant to hear. "I think I can easily satisfy your curiosity, my dear. I gave orders for some alterations to be made in one of the rooms in that corridor. Probably that was the fellow you saw coming out. As for Deacon having told you that the room at the extreme end of the corridor was forbidden to anyone, he was perfectly right, for those were my wishes. I am having valuables stored in strong safes in the room, and don't wish the work to be disturbed."

Marcella listened politely. She believed her father implicitly, though a vague feeling of distrust lingered in her mind regarding the mysterious stranger who did not resemble a workman.

"By the way, my dear," Sir Cyprian continued suavely; "I suppose you passed on to your own apartments when that man came out of the corridor?"

"On the contrary," she replied lightly, "I was too astonishd to move! I kept back within the shadow, and he rather interested me, because——"

The butler, Wermen, who, during this conversation had been moving about the room, paused for a moment in the act of pouring some champagne into a glass, as though waiting to hear the end of her sentence.

Sir Cyprian smiled, and stroked the leaves of one of the flowers nearest him with gentle fingers.

"Interested you, dear child; how was that?"

"He put something under the rug at the door," she answered; "and after he had gone, I stooped to satisfy myself what it was, and to my surprise found an article not at all dreadful or blood-curdling, but extremely fascinating. It was a spade guinea!"

"We must watch that girl, Wermen," said Sir Cyprian. "She is uncommonly alert."

At that moment there was a crash of glass at the sideboard.

Wermen had knocked over a Venetian vase of which Sir Cyprian was particularly fond.

A slight frown wrinkled the almost boyish brow of his master.

"How clumsy you are, Wermen! Leave the room!"

As they finished their dessert Marcella said abruptly: "Oh, I nearly forgot to give you a message Mr. Nullius left for you," and a faint flush rose to her cheeks as she remembered how loth she had been to see the handsome curate leave that afternoon.

Her father looked at her sharply. His thoughts had been intent on something else, and it was with a struggle against impatience that he said:

"What message had Mr. Nullius, the curate, that it would not keep until he saw me? I suppose it was to drain me for some charity?"

Marcella's large brown eyes flashed.

"Mr. Nullius called here, and had I not overheard Wermen telling him a string of lies about my being engaged when he asked to see *me* as you were in your studio, he would have been obliged to go without leaving a dying woman's message."

For an instant a curious change came over the still remarkably handsome face of the baronet. It seemed almost as though his fair skin had tightened into a network of fine wrinkles, and his mouth quivered under the sweeping yellow moustache. But before Marcella could do more than fancy

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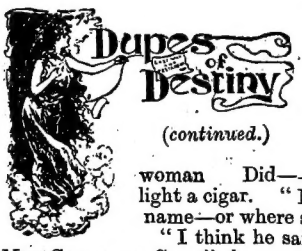

(*continued.*)

that her eyes had played her a trick, her father rose quickly from the table with an expression of concern.

"That's very sad! Of course, my dear, in that case I should have been told at once. A dying woman Did——" He turned his back to light a cigar. "Did Mr. Nullius tell you her name—or where she came from?"

"I think he said that her name was either Mrs. Graves, or Grey," she answered slowly. "She is at 14 Digges Row, and she comes from Australia."

Sir Cyprian held the match in his hand so long that it burnt his fingers, and he dropped it with a soft exclamation.

"I will go to her at once," he said, then, as though he had remembered something, he turned to the girl gazing dreamily into the fire, and said:

"Let me have that spade guinea, my dear. That fellow must have found it on the floor, and thinking better of stealing it, replaced it where it would probably have been found in time. I would not lose it for the world, as it has taken me a long period to get a collection of them—they are very rare."

Marcella took it from the little bag at her waist, and handed it back to her father, then said suddenly:

"Will you let me come and see your collection one day, father? I have been home nearly a month, and you have never let me see you working in your studio yet."

A gentle smile curved Sir Cyprian's lips. "I am very sensitive about allowing my daubs to be seen. But I will send some of my pictures up to you one day. My studio is a rough sort of place, unfit for a woman to visit; you would be all over paint in two minutes."

Marcella laughed. "Did my mother ever see your studio, father?"

Sir Cyprian did not answer immediately, but the pupils of his bright blue eyes expanded for a moment, then he put his hand on his daughter's shoulder:

"Once, Marcella. Your mother had no taste for art. I hope," he went on, "that I shall find you are an obedient daughter. If you obey my wishes and don't thwart my instructions to the servants, you will find me a kind, indulgent father; but"—and he smiled slightly—"go against them, and you will dash your little head against a stone wall! Your mother went contrary to me—once, and regretted it ever after. So now I warn you in time!"

He stooped and a light caress fell upon the girl's brown hair and the next moment Sir Cyprian Rust had closed the door gently behind him, leaving his only child silent from bewilderment at her unexpected reproof.

In the hall the baronet, clad in a long dark overcoat and a soft, slouch hat, was speaking with low, rapid gestures to Wermen, who held the door open for his master.

"Don't let an exhibition like that occur again," he said curtly; "I thought all these years had schooled you never to show surprise at anything."

The old man's hand trembled. "I'm very sorry, sir," he muttered, "but it came so sudden, and made me think of the—the mistress, the first time she—talked like that."

Sir Cyprian's fair face clouded. "Then keep your thoughts to yourself next time," he snarled; adding quickly, "I suppose the 'Shovel' got off safely?"

"Yes, sir," answered the other in a low tone; "although he was worried at not finding the usual sign that all was safe."

"Ah!" Sir Cyprian breathed; "it was an awkward occurrence this afternoon. Before, there was no great occasion for care. We must watch that girl, Wermen! Don't be careless with the keys. She is uncommonly alert. I want no bungling."

Then, with a curt movement of his head that denoted the conversation was finished, Sir Cyprian Rust left the Court, walking rapidly in the direction of Digges Row, the sordid end of the village from where the dying woman had sent her disturbing message.

FOURTH CHAPTER.

A Tardy Confession.

When he reached the humble abode of No. 14, Sir Cyprian Rust hesitated. He was naturally a cool man, but somehow his nerves were slightly shaken, perhaps by the fact that his daughter seemed to be more self-reliant than he had desired or expected her to be.

"Bah!" he muttered. "I put off having her back from Belgium as long as I could, but when she reached her twenty-first birthday, I could not invent another excuse to keep her away. But I will show her that I am master—as I showed that other fool. And this—this beggar, can only be a poor wretch wanting refuge from the workhouse, and knowing that I am a rich man, wants to plead for money."

He knocked at the door softly.

A woman answered it, and in his long coat and slouch hat that nearly covered his eyes, did not recognise at first the owner of the Court.

"Mrs. Graves is expecting you, I think, sir," she said, and led the way into a dark, narrow, little room at the back of the house where, on a bed in the corner, a woman lay.

"Ah!" she breathed in a low tone of relief. "I was afraid you would not come. That I might die before I could say what I wanted!"

"If there is anything I can do for you, my good creature," said Sir Cyprian, in a patronising voice; "tell me as quickly as you can, for I have an engagement, and only came here because your request was so very unusual."

The woman laughed weakly. "And *I* have an Engagement, too; so will not keep you long in case *I* have to go before I unburden myself to you."

An uneasy sensation seized the man of wealth who stood looking down on the thin, wasted face of the woman, who, in the dim light, looked about forty years old.

She beckoned him nearer to her; "Years ago, sir, I was maid to Sir Basil Wingate's daughter, Miss Helen—afterwards Mrs. Jerningham. I was jealous of her—for reasons I need not say now; and, God forgive me! I did her a great wrong of which I have long repented and sought to find her. It was with that reason that I left England and went to Australia, seeking for Mr. Jerningham or those belonging to her. I—I—nearly found Mrs. Jerningham once, but he had gone when I got to the place; then—then, I married and settled down there; but I could not rest, and I had to come back."

"You have not yet told me what you did," Sir Cyprian said coldly. "Why this sudden storm is a teacup over what must have taken place more than twenty years ago? Besides, my good creature, I should be unable to help you."

"No, sir! You could right the wrong for me!" the woman panted. "You could seek out those that I had sinned against, and put them in their proper places!"

"What did you do?" he said again; this time his curiosity excited to a strange pitch.

She raised herself on her elbow, and fixing him with glittering eyes, said: "I stole the will—the real will, written by Sir Basil Wingate on his death-bed, leaving everything he possessed to his daughter, Mrs. Jerningham, in trust for her children—whether *boys* or girls—and failing them, sir, it was to pass over *you*, and go to your child, if you had one. Oh, I learnt it all!" she said wearily. "I never forgave myself for concealing it. But you will take the will, sir, and seek for the child of Helen Jerningham, won't you?"

Sir Cyprian Rust did not reply immediately. He had felt so sure after all these years that both the inconvenient cousin and her possible son had died before leaving Australia, that to hear that there was a later will still in existence likely to threaten his security, was a blow so dreadful that it dazed him at first.

"You have the will here?" he said eagerly. "Of—of course, I will put everything in the hands of the solicitors at once. I am independent of Sir Basil Wingate's money, but—but I have a child also"—and his eyes glinted oddly—"she will be only too glad to waive aside all her rights should she have a cousin living."

"But she has, sir!" the woman whispered; "your daughter

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can never have that money—or you the title; for the boys of Helen Jerningham are somewhere in the world, wanting their inheritance."

Sir Cyprian caught his breath sharply. What arrant nonsense was this creature talking, and why did it make his heart flutter wildly and the blood tingle in his veins like quicksilver?

"Your mind must be wandering," he said brusquely; "there were no boys born to my cousin, or the solicitors and myself would have heard of it at once. There were advertisements in the papers for six months for news of her or the child and—no notice was taken of them."

"I know what I know," the woman whispered, her pale lips shaping the words painfully. "I heard she left for England—but never reached it alive; the stewardess on board the ship that took her on her last journey told me, when I met her on the arrival of the ship at Sydney, that a woman had died among the third-class passengers, giving birth to two boys—and I know that the woman was Mrs. Jerningham."

"Why didn't you pursue your inquiries regarding the boys then?" sneered the baronet with a chilly laugh.

"I did; and heard that one of them had been adopted, the other sent to a home."

Then she raised herself on the pillows. "Something tells me, sir, that they—or one of them—is alive now. Promise me that you will seek them out; they must be men by this time, and Fate has cheated them of their rights for a long time."

"Yes, yes," muttered Sir Cyprian quickly; "I will do my best to find them. But—but I can do nothing without the will—the new will you say you stole from the dying baronet. That must be produced before any steps can be taken."

The woman's hand fumbled beneath her pillows, and Sir Cyprian held his breath with suspense.

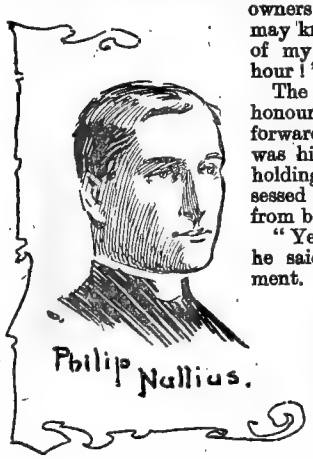
"This is the will," she murmured; "I have always kept it by me in case anything happened; and I put it under my pillow when Mr. Nullius, the curate, told me he would have my message given to you. He is a good man."

Sir Cyprian made an impatient movement. He did not care about the virtues of the village curate, he only wanted to possess the will that the creature who lay at her last gasp held in her power.

He reached out his hand with a smothered ejaculation: "Let me have it," he said hoarsely—beads of perspiration standing on his white brow.

A strange instinct warned the woman on the dirty little bed, that the interests of the baronet were at variance with those of the wronged, and she regretted that she had not trusted her secret with one less interested in the issues of the new will.

She kept her hand under the pillow, while she said earnestly: "Promise, on your oath, before the God in whose presence I shortly shall be, that you will use this will for the furthering of justice; that you will seek out those motherless boys and make over the title and estate, with all the money, to the rightful owners! Promise me, so that I may know that I have done a little of my duty even at the eleventh hour!"



The baronet—who wore his honours like a giant's robe—leant forward, nearer the hand that was hidden under the pillow, still holding the document that possessed the power to cut the ground from beneath his feet.

"Yes, yes; of course I do!" he said, suppressing his excitement. "I promise everything!"

Still the woman held back, eyeing him fearfully, and with increasing doubt in his mind. Her instinct, quickened by the approach of the Great Reaper, detected the false note in his voice.

"I have changed my mind," she murmured nervously. "Perhaps it will be better to give it to the curate, Mr. Nullius. Then no one can misjudge you, sir. Will you call him? He said he would be here soon."

An ugly gleam flickered in Sir Cyprian's usually seraphic eyes and he bit his lip vindictively.

With a swift movement he wrenched the woman's hand from beneath her pillow and seized the precious document in a second.

"It is quite safe with me," he said roughly. "You have no cause to doubt me. I gave you my promise and will keep it, when I have mastered the contents of the will."

She flung out her hand. "Give it back, I say! You are false! I know you are! I will let Mr. Nullius take it; I can put perfect faith in him, and he will be here now."

She raised her head suddenly and cried: "Mr. Nullius, come quick! I want you! I want——"

In another moment a strong white hand was clapped to her mouth and increased in pressure until the woman's struggles suddenly ceased, and she lay quiet.

* * * * *

Sir Cyprian Rust rose from the awkward position in which he had been kneeling, and stroked back the damp hair that had fallen across his forehead. His knees were stiff also, and he breathed quickly.

At the door he came face to face with the curate, Philip Nullius.

"I have just received a strange confession from that poor soul," he said; "she has evidently suffered much through her sin, but none of us can afford to throw stones," he continued gently; "and I am going to do the best I can for those she has left in my care. I think, Mr. Nullius, that you are the only person whose aid she needs now."

With a brief nod on either side the two men parted and the curate entered the darkened room.

After one swift glance at the face on the pillow he fell on his knees and began to murmur the prayers for the dead.

FIFTH CHAPTER.

The Gold King.

Caleb J. Johnson, financier, company promoter, Society lion, and City scamp, smiled as he ran through the papers and letters placed by his side at the breakfast-table.

He was not a commonplace man—in fact his personality was inclined to be magnetic, to which fact he owed the greater part of his success; for, few and far between were the men and women who could withstand that plausible tongue or facile imagination, that would explain in terms of sugared conviction the prospectus of a new mine in which he was interested, or rather, in which he desired the public to be interested—which was quite another matter.

Enormously tall, with square shoulders, and weighing nearly fifteen stone, he was a conspicuous figure at any time. His head was large, but with the largeness of a brilliant intelligence rather than that of the brainless idiot.

His eyes were smallish, twinkling and expressionless, not unlike stars, nearly buried in clouds of fat of eyelid and cheek. His nose was straight and characterless, his skin flabby, and his chin had long since effaced itself in layers of other more recent chins.

Yet, like the bull-dog, his ugliness was his beauty, for it served as a foil to his perfect courtesy, his inimitable tact, and indomitable perseverance to come out on top in whatever piece of villainy he participated—whether swindling in the City, or posing in Society.

Of the past, before he swooped upon the market with his boundless wealth and breathless prospectuses, no one ever

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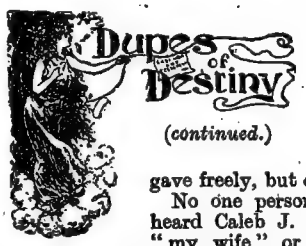

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heard him speak; and it never occurred to anyone to question him. Caleb J. Johnson, the gold king, was all they cared about. His capital interested the world more than his inner life; and of his money he gave freely, but of himself he spoke rarely.

No one person could say they had ever heard Caleb J. Johnson mention the words "my wife" or "my family"—the man's gold seemed to have grown round him, placing a glittering barrier between him and the outer circle.

And over the top of that yellow wall the little twinkling eyes of the man laughed at those who scrambled for his favours, and took upon themselves the brunt of his erratic humours for the sake of the money that filtered through his fingers. His name stood well in the City, and it had never yet headed a bogus prospectus.

"Fat, fifty, and famous!" a man had once described him as being, and, sitting at his well-spread table, with its neat bachelor appointments, the words were very apt.

He tossed most of the letters aside with a contemptuous smile. He knew why he was invited to all the big crushes of the season; not on account of his appearance or his birth—for he possessed neither the one nor the other. But the mothers in Society had daughters in the market that were labelled with a price, and to the highest bidder that came along those mothers were prepared to knock down, to the tune of "going—going—gone!" the souls of their children. And Caleb J. Johnson knew that when he turned his beady glance upon one fair Society flower, a dozen maternal pulses throbbed with envy.

He picked up one letter, and his smile lost its twist of contempt. It was from a woman he respected—one who treated him—for all his wealth—with the same languid interest she would bestow upon a Battersea pariah. He had met her at several balls, "at homes," and week-end parties, and his interest had grown to admiration.

He opened the letter curiously. It was a dainty epistle, redolent of violets, and prettily worded:

"Dear Mr. Johnson,—*Will you dine with me on Thursday next? Quite an informal party, consisting of myself, my nephew, and Sir Cyprian Rust. I do hope your many engagements will allow you to come, for I will be more than pleased to show you my humble home.*—*Yours sincerely,*

"Violet Frayne-Lennox."

"Lady Violet Frayne-Lennox," the financier murmured, thoughtfully. "Age forty, and looks thirty; elegant, and an aristocrat to the finger-tips. A widow with a competence and no encumbrances. A rare woman who, in spite of the whirlpool that is always near her, has avoided the eddies. A woman who would be a credit to the position of a millionaire's wife. She has had a sufficient lack of money to make her appreciate the handling of unlimited coin, and sufficient breeding to make her treat the possessor of it like dirt!"

He clasped his large, capable hands together, and smiled oddly.

"So she has the baronet, Sir Cyprian Rust, staying with her! A strange coincidence! I remember Sir Cyprian's name, and he probably heard me mentioned in terms not exactly those of love, when that little fool led me innocently to believe that she was an heiress!"

He rose suddenly. "Those days are dead, Caleb J. Johnson, the millionaire, has no truck with the penniless, headstrong Caleb J. ——" He smiled, and cut the end of a cigar with thoughtful precision. "'Lady Violet Johnson' is not so pretty, but one day we may do away with the 'Johnson,' and if she prefers it, adopt the other. I will meet this Sir Cyprian Rust! It will be amusing to see the man whom I envied and reviled as a boy! Also, I will study Lady Violet."

He touched a bell, and dictated one or two letters to his secretary, then wrote a neat, conventional acceptance of the only invitation he had opened.

* * * * *

The strains of the Green Hungarian Band floated from the windows of the house next door to that of Lady Violet Frayne-Lennox, who was entertaining only a very small party that evening, nearly all the guests of which were already in the house.

The hostess was the first to arrive in the large Louis XVI. drawing-room. She was a beautiful woman, but her dark, restless eyes conveyed an impression of always suppressing and fighting some hidden longing. That look was a puzzle to most people, and one or two imagined they had found the key to it. But Lady Violet Frayne-Lennox knew that she had herself flung away the key to forgetfulness with wilful fingers.

She halted before a long cheval glass. Her glittering robe of black sequins clinging to her lissom figure, threw into bold relief the dead white of her marble skin, and the sleek, well-groomed head, with its coronet of brown hair surmounting a small, patrician face, curiously defiant and supplicating at the same time.

"I think he may ask me to-night," she murmured. "He seems to have made up his mind; and, after all, there is little risk in it. More than seven years have passed since that incubus ceased to bleed me. I may with impunity consider myself what the world imagines me. And his money will be very acceptable! Yes; if he proposes to-night it will be a matter of congratulation to my dressmaker, and of gall and wormwood to my friends!"

The door opened noiselessly, and a man stood on the threshold, smiling at the vision of feminine loveliness and charm appreciating its own powers.

"Age cannot wither her," he laughed, and a mocking note touched his mirth with satire.

Lady Violet turned slowly from the glass. Her hands were trembling, and her eyes sparkled ominously.

"Age passes us both by, Cyprian," she answered, "you still retain your sheen of youth and golden hair as of yore. You are no older in appearance than when——" She paused and her mouth quivered.

"Than when," the man finished, smiling strangely, "you and I, my charming Violet, contracted a very convenient compact giving us each what we both wanted at the time—you, money, and I——" he shrugged his shoulders. "A very poor bargain after all!"

"What do you mean?" the woman flashed. "I gave of my life and soul, you only a few pounds that you barely missed! I gave blood, you paltry gold!"

"Hardly paltry, my dear sister-in-law," murmured the baronet, casting a glance round the richly-appointed room in which they stood, "since for twenty years it has kept up this place for you, and given your beauty a decent background. On the other hand, it is *I* who should grumble. Your sister—my dear, lamented wife"—his voice was curiously low—"did not prove the gold mine I expected of her. There was no heir to take my title and the money after me, and I am placed in the unhappy position of being unable to marry again."

The woman clasped her white hands, on the fingers of which glittered precious stones.

"You killed her soul, and flung open the windows of her

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mind! You allowed her to—tumble upon the truth—the awful truth that she told me!"

Sir Cyprian Rust smiled gently. "Have you seen Marcella yet? She is a promising girl, but I had cause to reprimand her some days ago. She discovered too much. She found—a spade guinea!"

Lady Violet Frayne-Lennox shuddered, and her eyes grew distended with an unspoken thought.

"Marcella! Oh, God, spare her!" she murmured, turning a white, strained face to him. "Don't let *her* know, Marcella—my——"

"Your niece, Violet," said the cold voice, "is my daughter, and my heiress. After me she inherits the property. Her life is valuable, don't fear."

"Then why did you insure her life when a baby?" she said slowly. "What has caused it to be so valuable—now?"

He smiled slightly. "The life of a child is uncertain—sometimes! Marcella has every reason to live to old age as far as I am concerned."

"But *she* died!" breathed the woman.

"Yes!" he answered, slowly. "Her death was her own fault. The insurance on her life was paid over to me only after due inquiries had been made by the insurance people. Now," he continued, sarcastically, "that you have satisfied your inquiries, I have my wishes to express to you."

Her eyes dilated suddenly. "They are?"

"The house of that millionaire chap, Johnson, contains a valuable lot of plate, and you have the *entrée* to it. When next you visit it there are certain details I wish you to note, and——"

"Not *that* house!" she gasped. "I cannot, even to you! He will be here to-night, as my guest."

He looked at her curiously. "You either do this for me, or Marcella will know that for a certain sum her—aunt—sold her!"

For one brief moment the woman hesitated, then her answer came, slowly:

"I will do it; for my task-master is a hard one!"

As voices drew near they separated, and presently Lady Violet Frayne-Lennox was laughing and chatting with Marcella, who was statuesque in soft silver gauze, while Sir Cyprian Rust and Mr. Caleb J. Johnson discussed the City.

Lady Violet drew the girl aside. "Are you happy, dear, with—with your father?"

Marcella's eyes opened. "Oh, yes, auntie! But he's a fearful recluse at home, and spends all his time in his studio."

Lady Violet shivered and turned to her nephew, Edward Day, a slim, fair, young man, with a weak, effeminate face.

"You must take Marcella to see the conservatory after dinner, Edward; she has not been here before."

In the drawing-room, towards the end of the evening, when Sir Cyprian was playing Bridge with Edward Day, Johnson seized the chance for which he had come.

"Lady Violet, I am a plain, bluff man, like my name but I want to ask you a question. Will you marry me?"

Although she had expected the question, Lady Violet was not prepared with an answer.

"I—I——" she murmured, "am not sure that I can marry you, Mr. Johnson!"

"Why not?" said the financier, coolly. "You are a widow—I, a bachelor. Why should we not marry, if you think we can jog along together comfortably? Is there any just cause or impediment?"

A faint smile touched her lips.

"No, Mr. Johnson. As far as I know, there is no just cause or impediment. I am perfectly free to marry you."

A low, amused laugh broke the stillness that followed her words. It did not come from the financier, but from the balcony that had wide windows flung open.

Lady Violet turned sharply. Her lips were white.

"What was that noise?" she said, hoarsely.

The financier looked at her in surprise. "Some loafer outside," he said. "But, come, Violet; you have not said that you would marry me."

Again the laugh sounded, mockingly derisive; then the palms in front of the window parted suddenly, and a man lurched heavily into the room.

(Another long instalment of this fine serial next week.)

A LOST MEMORY.

The Tale of a Christmas Gift.

The operation was over.

The cleverest surgeon that could be obtained had finished his work, and now, with the family physician, awaited a final interview with the father of his patient.

There was good and bad news to tell John Chambers about his son.

He came into the room and advanced towards them, with his teeth set; what would their report be? He waited for it anxiously.

'We are glad to say that our work has been successful in one direction, that of saving life, Mr. Chambers, your son will live, but——" the surgeon paused.

"But, sir."

Outwardly calm and possessed, yet with the demon of suspense tugging at his heart, the great financier awaited the conclusion of the sentence. The patient was his only son, in whom all his ambition and hopes were planted.

"We are sorry to state, that when your son recovers consciousness, he will have no memory; all the past will be as a blank; he will not even remember his name, nor the fact that you are his father."

"Thank Heaven!"

Was the man mad? To thank Heaven that his son would be as a complete stranger to him—that his intellect would be clouded of aught that had happened, even as a little child; he would be obliged to trace his progress up the ladder of education. To thank Heaven for *that*!

"I am afraid you do not fully understand your son's position, sir—what such a state means," said the physician gravely. "Your son will have no affection for you; practically he has to begin life over again."

"Thank you, gentlemen, but I think I fully realise my son's position; physically he will soon be well; mentally, nothing remains to him of the past, no promises he has made or anything of that sort."

The surgeon bowed.

"And for that loss of memory—as his father—I again say 'Thank God,' but I must not keep you waiting. Accept my grateful thanks for what you have done, sir, and this"—handing the astonished surgeon an envelope; "you, doctor, will watch over Edward until he is restored to his normal strength. I have the honour to wish you both 'Good-day.'"

And Mr. Chambers left the room with a brighter step than when he had entered it.

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Doctors Aknew and Renfrew stared blankly at one another, then the latter said:

"I think it must be this, Mr. Chambers is a most arbitrary and ambitious man. I heard he had set his heart on some marriage for his son, but young Ned turned restive, and vowed he would only marry some penniless lassie whom he had met, and lately there have been rumours of ructions between father and son."

"There may be something in that," responded his companion; "still, it is strange."

* * * * *

John Chambers went to his study, and, unlocking a drawer, took three letters, all written in the same girlish hand, one bearing the postmark of that morning; this he read with a sneer on his face:

"My Dear, Dear Ned,—*Why don't you come or write? I am getting so anxious. It is now three weeks since I heard from you, and it will be Christmas Day on Friday. Ned, darling it's not like you to keep your little girl in suspense. Come darling, soon, to your own.* "Mary."

This was the reason; this Mary was the girl for whom his son Ned had taken such a mad infatuation; a dancing master's daughter, earning her living at teaching music; a nice wife for his son, who would be heir to over half a million. Fate, however, had played into his hand. He would go to this girl, and in his son's name break off all connection with her. If he had promised to marry her, so much the worse. If she insisted on seeing him, well, she could, for his memory would be a blank as regarded her as well as everyone else. Her voice and figure would awaken no chord. And the hard man chuckled.

He wrote down the address, 2 Rose Mansions, Maida Vale. He would drive there at once.

* * * * *

In her tiny flat Mary Chambers waited and waited for a letter or the appearance of her husband, for Ned Chambers had married her some three months previously, trusting time would soften the old man's heart, and then their secret marriage would be forgiven.

Mary had been averse to the deception, but she was not strong, and the constant out-of-door journeys she was obliged to take—for her music pupils were very scattered—had weakened her constitution, and after a sharp attack of influenza, she had given way and consented, and had promised never to mention the fact that she was married to Edward Chambers to anyone, until he gave her leave.

Edward Chambers had been too much in love to consider the consequences of such a step. His allowance from his father would provide for his wife, and he resolved meantime to fit himself for some profession, so that if in time he should be disinherited because of his refusal to carry out his father's wishes, he would be enabled to maintain himself and his wife.

Fond of engineering, he had for some months been studying it, both practically and otherwise, much to Mr. Chambers' disgust, who, to have more hold upon his son, had purposely prevented his taking up a profession.

In the midst of the girl's sad reflections she heard the bell, and she ran joyfully to answer it: perhaps it was a message from Ned.

In the dusk of the December afternoon she at first thought it was her husband, and she exclaimed:

"Oh! Ned." But as the stranger followed her into the light she saw she had made a mistake, though from his appearance and likeness she knew her visitor to be Ned's father.

"You are my Ned's father, I can tell; is he ill?" she asked anxiously, and her eyes filled with tears, while terror seized her; this hard, stern-faced man had not come as a friend.

John Chambers leisurely surveyed the room, which gave unmistakable evidence of his son's visits. In one corner was his walking-stick, on a small table his engineering books; this was where he spent his time—with this girl.

No mercy should be shown to her.

"I have brought a message to you from my son," he said coldly. "He has gone abroad on special business for me, but before going he asked me to call upon you."

"I do not understand," faltered the girl. "Is Ned ill?"

"Perfectly well." He told the lie without a quiver. She had evidently heard nothing of the motor smash and its sad result—and should continue to know nothing.

Placing an envelope on the table, he said:

"My son desired me to say that he has grown tired of his—ahem!—entanglement with you, and that he desires to forget it, and bade me bring you this," pointing to the letter.

Grown tired of her? What did it mean? Mechanically Mary opened the envelope and saw that its sole contents was a bank-note. The room seemed to be dancing round her. How could he send her that message? He was her husband. This dreadful man did not know that; she would tell him, but—she remembered she had promised not.

She collected her courage, and facing her visitor bravely, said:

"Take back this money, though you are Ned's father. I do not believe he sent it to me, or the message you have brought. I will see him myself."

"You are welcome to, on his return," he answered roughly; "but you will find he will deny all knowledge of you." He added scornfully: "His words to me were, 'if she persists in seeing me, father, I shall deny having known her.'"

Taking no notice of this taunt, Mary said quietly:

"When does he return?"

He made a rapid calculation. It was now December the 24th. If he allowed Ned a month, that would do.

"A month from to-day."

"Very well. I shall call at your house in Palace Gardens on the 24th of January at three o'clock," and with a gentle, dignified manner, she held open the door for her unwelcome visitor to depart.

That night, as he visited the sick-room, and heard the nurse's report as to the progress of her patient, the bells from St. Mary Abbot's chimed out their message of love, forgiveness, and peace—the message which every year they rang out afresh, but they touched no string in the financier's heart; the dust of ambition and avarice had corroded the strings of love and peace. His only son should wed rank and money, not a penniless girl, whose only dower was her looks, so the bells taught him nothing.

But they rang a whisper of comfort and hope to the poor deserted girl bride. There was a God, who would protect and care for her and Ned, for she believed not a word of what that cruel man had said; only she must be patient and wait.

But that Christmas Day was a sad one to the lonely little wife.

Where was Ned?

A month later Mr. Chambers sat after lunch chatting to his son, who, apparently quite well, was trying to grasp everything that those around him endeavoured to impart. But it was hard work.

He could recall nothing, and could only do exactly what he was told, and as the man, who said he was his father, directed.

The butler entered, and whispered something to the elder man.

"All right, show her up in two minutes, Dale. Ned, my boy, I want you to listen to me. There is a lady coming here; she will speak to you, and ask you things, you must simply say, 'I do not know you.' Do you understand?"

"Yes, father," he repeated slowly. "I—do—not—know—you."

Mary Chambers came softly into the room and walked straight to her husband's side. Her voice was sweet and gentle, as she tried to take his hand, saying:

"Ned, why have you not been to see me?" But he strove to push her away, and said in a mechanical way:

"I—do—not—know—you."

The anxiety of the last month had strained Mary's powers of endurance, and when she heard those words from her own husband it was too much: she fell fainting at his feet.

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When she recovered he was gone out of the room, and her only wish was to be gone also, and, refusing all aid, she walked into the street, alone and friendless, denied by the man who had sworn to cherish her, with the knowledge that for the future she must protect and care for herself.

* * * * *

"This is passing strange, Aknew; a year to-day you operated on him, and we had to tell his father the sad result, and now this afternoon that you should have to operate again. It was unfortunate his getting in this railway smash," said Dr. Renfrew.

"It may be fortunate. I am hopeful that this blow will cause a transformation. I think when I have finished and he awakes his memory will have returned, and only the past twelve months will be a blank."

Mr. Chambers came to them.

"I am glad to see you, sir."

"I hope after I have been with my patient to have some good news for you, Mr. Chambers; but I want to impress upon you this: If your son recovers consciousness, he will, I believe, fancy himself back in the events which happened before he was in that motor smash, and whatever he asks for, whomever he wishes to see—in short, what he wants, must be given to him. His desire must be satisfied if you wish his memory to return," said the surgeon.

"I do *indeed* wish it," said his listener, and the men of science went away to their patient.

Only a year ago—only one year, and yet to the financier it had seemed a lifetime. *That* his son Edward; that stupid, inanimate piece of humanity, whose sole wish appeared to be allowed to eat and sleep; this to be his survivor to carry on his race and endow it with distinction and honour. For his treachery Mr. Chambers had indeed been punished.

He had followed the movements of the girl whom his son had loved; she had left her flat and was living in one room, supporting herself with needlework, he discovered. He had many times sent her money, but it was always returned with the one sentence, "Your son denied me, so I can accept nothing from you or him," and in his heart he admired her. She was proud; he liked pride. If only she had been wealthy. Still, if his son's restoration to his normal self meant marriage with her, he would gladly give his consent.

Anxiously he paced the corridor, awaiting the surgeon's report. Suddenly the sound of voices came to him, someone was wishing a companion the compliments of the season. It was Christmas Eve again. What would this Christmas bring to him?

The door of the room in which his son lay opened quickly, and a nurse came to him.

"Your son is conscious and asking for you," she whispered.

"Father," said Ned's voice faintly, "father, have I been ill long? It—all seems—strange. I want my wife—Mary. I married her; that little music teacher, Mary. I want my wife, father, before I die."

"Satisfy him," whispered the surgeon; "say you will bring her; say something, man," for speech appeared to have left Mr. Chambers. Everything was swallowed up in the great thought; it was the voice of his son Ned who spoke; it was no stranger who touched him.

"I will bring her to you, Ned, my boy. Only rest," he said thankfully.

"You—will not be angry with—Mary, father? It was not her fault. You will love her," said the sick man, feverishly.

"Yes, Ned; she shall be a daughter to me," answered his father. And then as swiftly the motor could take him, he went to Shirland, to the poor abode where Mary lived.

Why had not the girl told him Ned had married her? Things would have been different then; he would not have allowed his son's wife to live in this manner, silly girl!

And now perhaps she would never forgive. She and Ned would be reconciled, and he, for his treason and revenge, would be an outsider in their happiness, and the old man sighed. Ned was all he had to love and care for.

Mary answered his knock, and his white face and changed look told her something had happened.

"Come at once," he said hurriedly. "Ned is ill and wants you." And then as they drove to the hospital he explained.

"He was thrown out of a motor a twelvemonth ago, and while he lay ill I opened your letters. When he recovered he had lost his memory, and I saw in that a chance to part you; but I did not know you were his wife. To-day he was injured in the collision at King's Cross, and by almost a miracle the operation has restored his memory. Only he remembers nothing of the events of the last twelve months. He is conscious and asking for you; but why—why did you not tell me he had married you?"

"I had promised Ned not to," she answered simply. But her eyes were shining with hope and joy. Ned had never been false.

Anxiously the medical men awaited their arrival; but their fears were allayed when Mary stole to their patient's side, and, pressing her face to his, whispered his name.

He would live now, and, best of all, regain his mental balance.

Softly they left the room for a few moments, and Mr. Chambers watched the girl kneeling by the bedside with an aching heart. Would Ned ever forgive?

Just then the bells from the neighbouring church rang out their merry chime, and their message this time awoke a response in the old man's heart.

"Ring out the false, ring out the false," that was what they were saying. When his son recovered he would be accounted false, and rung out of the lives of the two he had tried to separate.

He buried his face in his hands.

Then a gentle touch made him look up, and he saw the girl he had deceived standing by his side, and there was no hatred in her face, only a tender pity. He was Ned's father, and it was Christmas, and Ned was given back to her.

"Come to Ned," she whispered, "he wants you," and she led the broken man to his son's side.

"I'm—getting—sleepy, father," said the young fellow, "but before I rest I want to give you my Christmas present—a daughter, my Mary," and he placed the girl's hand in his father's.

And then the nurse gently pushed them away, and said her patient must be quiet, and the old man led his daughter from the room.

"Can you really forgive me, Mary?" he said in astonishment.

"Ah, yes, father, for you too, have something to forgive. We were wrong to deceive you; henceforth there shall be no deception, and Ned and I will try to make you happy."

And the bells chimed out again. But this time their message was "Ring in the new."

Robert Murray.

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The Heart of Dorothy Nevill.

The Story of a Love that was Cast Aside, but which was Happily Regained.

THE door stood open, showing a glimpse of the sweet, old-fashioned garden, bathed in sunlight, and sweet with the scent of roses, mignonette, and the spicy odour of the tall, white phlox. In the field below they were carrying the corn, and the voices of the reapers sounded pleasantly—the deep tones of the men, the shrill trebles of the children, and sometimes the fuller, sweeter notes of a woman's voice.

I have seen and heard it all, so many, many times, but never before had the summer seemed so glad, never before had the sun shone, the roses bloomed, the nightingale sung, as in that summer. And in all the countryside, I thought, there could not be a happier girl than I, Dorothy Nevill.

All the afternoon I had dreamt under the shade of the tall beech trees, dreamt of all that made life so fair, so gorgeous a thing. But when the sun grew low in the Heavens, I hastened home, and hurrying to my room, slipped on my daintiest frock, a quaintly fashioned gown of pale mauve muslin.

Then, when I was ready I stood before the glass, a tall, slim figure, a childish face, with brown eyes and lips scarlet as the poppy in the corn. Surely I was a pretty thing in those days—days so long ago that I may well be pardoned for remembering.

I had reason for pleasure in my looks, the best, the only reason worth the name. I had a sweetheart, tall, strong, with brave blue eyes and a sunny smile, and I loved him—loved him with all my heart. He was waiting for me now, this moment. I wonder did he keep watch for me as anxiously as I for him?

I passed down the wide oak staircase, pausing a moment as I reached the garden door to pluck a deep red rose. I remember it so well—the cool hush of the twilight, the singing of the birds, and the drowsy humming of the insects in the grass.

As I crossed the meadow I caught sight of Mark standing head and shoulders above the men in the middle of the field. He did not see me, and I felt relieved. Mark was very good to me—a more loving brother no girl ever had—but he was just a little strict, and would as like as not have ordered me back. I had fancied more than once that he had guessed my secret, for he had asked cousin Will how it was "young Verner was always hanging round the place," and had muttered something about "teaching him to keep his distance," in a tone which sent the hot blood to my face.

But Mark, Will, and all else went from my mind as I entered the beech grove, for, coming to meet me with glad eyes and outstretched hands, was my sweetheart, Allen Verner.

"Red as a rose is she," he said, laughing, and kissed my face again to make it redder. "Have you never a word for me, Dorothy?"

I stood there, blushing and confused, the loving speeches in my heart dying away before they reached my lips.

"I thought the time would never come," I faltered out at last.

"You wanted me, Dorothy? That is good news. See what I have brought for you."

He made me shut my eyes, drawing my head upon his shoulder. I felt his fingers touch my wrist, and, looking up, I uttered a little cry of pleasure and surprise.

"Do you like it, dearest?" he said. "I had some difficulty to find a bracelet small enough for such a dainty wrist."

It was an exquisitely-fashioned bracelet of gold, made in the form of a tiny handcuff, with scrolls, and leaves, and flowers, in open work, while here and there peeped out a rosebud of diamonds or a wreath of pearls.

"It is too beautiful for me," I murmured, but he laughed my doubts away.

"Don't I deserve a kiss for it, sweetheart? You've never given me one yet."

"Not for the bracelet," I said reproachfully.

"Well, then, for myself."

Flushing, I raised my face, and wondering greatly at my boldness, clasped my arms about his neck.

"Not for the bracelet, but because I love you," I said softly. Then I kissed him. And I never hear the soft, west wind sighing among the beech trees on the hill, but I remember. He held me to his heart, and called me strange, sweet names, and I was happy beyond all knowledge, past all thought.

The moon had touched the trees to silver, when with a start I thought of Mark.

"It is late," I said, "I must go, I am afraid Mark will be angry."

I half hoped Allen would offer to come with me and explain matters—better than I could—to my brother, but he frowned at the mention of Mark's name, and turned aside with an impatient gesture.

"Why should you worry about your brother, Dorothy?" he said. "You're not a child. Surely you need not ask permission to go for a walk. Take my advice and don't allow any questions. Tell your brother it is not for him to say where you shall go, what you shall do."

He did not ask me, as he usually did, to meet him again. I was seized with a sudden fear that I had vexed him, that he did not mean to see me any more.

"Allen," I cried, "are you angry? Have I said something that you didn't like?"

"Why, Dorothy, how could you vex me? Do you care

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as much as that?" he whispered, and I noticed a touch almost of sadness in his voice. "I am not worth it; indeed, I think it would be best for you if I went right away."

But that I could not bear, and clinging to him I cried out that I should die if he ceased to care for me, to love me.

They told me many things against Allen Verner—many, alas! I found out for myself; but I know that he spoke the truth that evening, when he answered that I was very dear to him.

"I'm going up to town to-morrow," he said, after a while, "so I sha'n't see you for the next week. Will you be here on Wednesday, Dorothy?"

My heart sank at the thought of a whole week without him, but I was made happy once again when he declared that time away from me would be intolerable.

A last embrace, and then we parted, and as I reached the the top of the beech grove I turned and waved my hand. Allen was standing in the moonlight, I could see the smile upon his lips, the tender greeting in his eyes.

I hastened down the road, but as I passed the meadow—quite deserted now—I saw two figures coming from the farm. I recognised them as visitors at the Hall, and one of them, Captain Burton, as Allen's special friend. Somehow I did not want to meet them, so I slipped behind the hedge and waited till they had passed.

"It's a charming old place," said Captain Burton, "and as for the girl, I've never seen a lovelier face the whole world over. The brother's a superior sort of chap, too, for a farmer, isn't he?"

"The Nevills are of good family, I believe," returned the other carelessly, "at least, so Verner told me."

"It strikes me Allen will find the brother an awkward customer to tackle," he went on, "if he gets up to his usual games, let alone that Lady Helen is sure to hear about it."

"You're mistaken, Tollington. I wouldn't forgive Allen if he tampers with the poor child's happiness. He is not incapable of such a thing."

"All the same, my dear chap, she's very pretty, and he's—well, we all know what Verner is where a woman's concerned. I fancy Lady Helen will have rather a time of it."

What they mean, I wondered. Who was Lady Helen, and what had she to do with Allen. And whose happiness were they afraid he'd tamper with, he who had shown *me* what true happiness was? I felt a sudden chill of fear, and though I thrust it from me, a vague dread remained, and I wished, I wished a thousand times, that Allen was a farmer just like Mark.

And through the night the chill crept ever closer to my heart; but at the quickening of the dawn I heard the glad birds sing, and on the wings of their sweet melody my fear took flight, and with a happy smile I fell asleep.

* * * * * *

Ever since I could remember my cousin Will, half in play, half in earnest, had called me his little wife, and until I met Allen I had placidly accepted the future the words implied. But now that I had learnt what true love really meant, I understood how impossible it would have been for me to have married Will, and, foolishly, I took it for granted that he looked upon the matter in the same light as I.

Far from that being so, however, Will was only waiting till I was eighteen to speak to me, and, to my dismay, on the evening of my birthday, he commenced in a serious tone.

"I'm thinking, Dorothy," he said, "that it is time that you and I were promised man and wife. You know I've loved you since you were no higher than my hand, and now, my dear, that you're a woman grown, I think, and Mark agrees, we don't need to wait longer."

"Wait longer?" I stammered. "For what? What do you mean, Will?"

He came quite close and would have put his arm about me but that I pushed it off.

"I asked you, Dorothy, last summer, if you'd marry me?" he said.

"And my reply was 'Some day.' Well, who knows? 'Some day' I may."

But he was not to be so easily disposed of. High words passed between us, and at last, with flushed cheeks and tear-dimmed eyes, I left him brooding over what he called his "wrongs." Both of us had lost our tempers.

I was late at my meeting with Allen, and therefore stayed out later than I mostly did. When I reached the farm Mark was waiting for me at the gate.

"I want you, Dorothy," he said, and with a trembling heart I followed him into the oak-panelled parlour, where Will was waiting.

"You're late," said Mark at last, "Where have you been?"

Something—I know not what—told me that Mark knew about Allen. My brother, quick to blame, was always doubly angered at prevarication. I would answer, I decided, to the point. After all, as Allen said, was I not my own mistress in such a matter?

"I have been for a walk in the beech grove."

"With whom, Dorothy?"

"That has to do with me, Mark. Your question sounds more like a command than I care for."

"I'll answer for you," broke in Will. "You were with Allen Verner, the young squire."

"And what then?" I asked defiantly.

"And what is more," continued Will, paying no heed to the look of defiance that I cast at him, "you've met him almost every evening through the summer. I've heard whispers this long while down in the village, but I never thought it was Dorothy they meant. Dorothy, the girl I've trusted, loved, and cared for, all my life. I never dreamt that she would steal out secretly to meet that scoundrel, Allen Verner."

"How dare you say such things of him—*scoundrel*—he, the truest lover a woman ever had. It is not like you, Will, to call a man such names when no one is by to defend him but a girl. What is it to do with you that I meet Allen Verner? You say you love me. I don't want your love, for I—I *hate* you just as much as I love him."

He staggered a little as I finished, and stood against the wall with a dazed look in his eyes.

"Dorothy," said Mark, "you've acted in a foolish, nay, a wicked fashion. When have I ever refused you anything that you should steal out of the house as though you feared me? Had you but given me your confidence, I could have spared you bitter suffering. He's not a good man, Dorothy; you'll rue the day you met him yet."

"That's what is said of every man like Allen," I retorted. "What has he done so bad?"

"You tell me, Dorothy, you love him, and that he loves you?"

"I know he does," I cried, "I'll swear it."

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My brother laid his hand upon my shoulder and there was kindness in his face, almost pity.

"And has he asked you to be his wife?"

"He means to, he is only waiting. Why do you look like that? Why do you torture and torment me so? What do you mean, Mark, what do you mean?"

But it was not my brother who answered me. He had pity on my white, set face.

"Tell her, Will," he answered hoarsely, "I can't."

"I said that Allen Verner was a scoundrel, and I say it once again," said Will. "All the time that he's been meeting you and winning your heart away from home, from Mark, from me, he meant to marry another woman. He is engaged to marry Lady Helen Stuart in the Spring."

"It is false," I cried; "you're saying it to hurt me. It is not true, I——" but my words died away, and, like a cold hand in the darkness came the memory of the words I'd heard, "I'll not forgive him if he tampers with the girl's happiness," and "Lady Helen will hear of it."

With a bitter cry I turned on both of them. In my despair I uttered words cruel as untrue. I taunted them, my dear, kind brother, and the man who loved me as his life, with speeches, and mad threats poured from my lips, till panting and utterly exhausted, I fell trembling into a chair.

"I'll not believe it," I said sullenly, "unless he tells me so."

Mark called Will to one side, and they talked earnestly for a few moments. Then he told me what he had decided.

"I shall go to the Hall to-night, Dorothy, and see Mr. Verner. If he tells me that he wishes, or intends to marry you, well and good. If not, I shall warn him against seeing you again. In any case I promise to bring you his decision in his own handwriting."

The gate clanged after the two—Will was going to walk up to the Hall with Mark and in the scented darkness of the summer night I waited.

Ah, me! how much I suffered. Each breath seemed but to add to the dull heaviness that pressed upon me.

"It's not true," I sobbed, and lingered to hear Mark's footsteps up the path returning—surely it would be so—with the news that Allen was loyal to me. Even as I told myself that this was so, the doubt weighing upon my heart cried out, "He never loved you," and the clock ticked to the same refrain, and the lilac trees beat with their branches at the window—"Never loved you," and the wind rose to a wail, and the clouds gathered in the summer sky, because he never loved me.

I heard Mark's voice as he came through the gate. I tried to meet him calmly, tried to smile and seem confident of Allen. But when he entered my strength went from me. With a cry I put out my hand and snatched the note.

It ran as follows: "My Dorothy, for the last time I call you mine. I have deceived you wilfully, cruelly; I loved you, and had not the courage to tell you that I was bound to another woman. That I was going to marry Lady Helen Stuart."

The wind was shrieking now, and the rain beating with pitiless force upon the roses—happy roses, they could die, but I, alas, what was there left to me? Alas! he never loved me.

* * * * *

It was two days after that I awoke—just as the blue-grey mists of the early dawn were rising from the valley—with a great start, to find my heart beating as I have seen a bird beat with its wings against a cage. After a while I lay down again, but a sharp noise on the window pane as though a handful of small gravel had been thrown, startled me once more.

Fancying I knew not what, I crept to the window and looked out. Slight as was the noise I made, it had been heard.

"Miss Nevill," said a voice I recognised as Captain Burton's, "Verner's leaving England. He wants to see you once again before he goes, and begs that you will meet him in the beech grove—where he's waiting."

"Now?" I gasped.

"It is the only chance," he said. "I've tried my best to dissuade him, but he swears that he will see you. He wanted to come up to the house last evening, but I feared a quarrel with your brother. If you don't come now, Miss Nevill, I sha'n't be able to prevent him coming round to-morrow, and there may be trouble."

How could I refuse, when I remembered Mark's threat if Allen should again try to see me?

Once again I passed across the meadow, the last buttercups, heavy with dew, brushing against my ankles.

Once again I stood beside my lover at the old familiar spot.

Captain Burton was waiting a short distance down the road with a dogcart to drive Allen to the station after our last "Good-bye."

Even now I cannot recall those last sad words unmoved. But I remember—oh, how gladly—that I forgave him, fully, freely, and that when he talked of breaking faith with Lady Helen I bade him keep true to her and forget me. He had not been so much to blame as Mark had thought. Lady Helen was an heiress, and had been engaged to Allen since they were girl and boy. It was, in fact, a family affair, and his mother would, I think, have broken her heart had her pet scheme fallen through. For Lady Helen's thousands would pay off the many mortgages on the estate and leave her with an unencumbered income.

A lingering hand-clasp, a last fond look, and then I threw my arms about his neck and pressed my lips to his.

"For the last time," I said with a break in my voice, and then a rustling in the bushes, a muttered oath, a shot—Allen lay stretched upon the ground, and at his side, a grim look upon his face, stood Will.

"You thought to steal away with her this morning," he said. "Thank God, I've stopped your villainy once and for all."

I watched dazed, uncomprehending. As they lifted Allen from the ground, I heard him whisper, "Remember, Burton, the gun went off by accident. Don't let them know that Dorothy was here—poor Dorothy."

I followed Will up to the farm—and then for the first time I understood how terrible a thing had happened.

Allen was shot, and Will, my cousin Will, was guilty, if he died, of murder!

A merciful unconsciousness came over me, and I remember nothing more.

* * * * *

When I came downstairs once more I found the snow upon the ground in place of the rose petals I had left.

Allen had recovered sooner than was expected, and, Mark told me in a hesitating voice, was already married. Will had gone abroad, but before he went had been up to the Hall to visit Allen, and the two had shaken hands and parted, if not on friendly, still not on terms of enmity. No one had learnt the truth of the affair, and if Lady Helen guessed the wound was not a self-inflicted one she made no sign.

After a while I missed Will's face, his kindly smile, and pleasant voice.

"Why does not Will come back?" I said to Mark. But he only looked at me and sighed.

Christmas had come and gone before they thought me strong enough to venture out, and at the first step that I took I was reminded once again of Will.

The Winter snows had gone, and the first violets blossomed, and still he had not come. The freshness of the Spring seemed to lay a cool calm hand upon me. I saw with clearer eyes, with better judgment, and gradually I understood that my feeling towards Allen had been but "the first mistaken impulse of an undisciplined heart," and at the same moment I realised the value of the love which I had cast aside.

"Mark," I said one night, "will he never come?"

But on an April morning when the earth was fair with daffodils, and tall Lent lilies, Mark called me to go into the garden.

There, under the hawthorn tree was Will—love in his eyes, love in his heart, and both for me.

"I've come back, Dorothy," he said quite quietly, "shall I stay?"

And with my hands in his, my eyes fixed on his own, I answered with a sob:

"For ever."

John K. Prothero.

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Under the Mistletoe

A TALE OF THE AWAKENING OF LOVE

"How dare you kiss me, Gerald Loraine!" exclaimed Marian, her voice filled with the sudden anger his caress aroused.

"Well, weren't you under the mistletoe, and isn't it a man's privilege at this season to kiss the maid he finds there?" inquired the offender with exasperating coolness, holding her fast.

"Do you imagine I could forego so tempting a pleasure when it was within my grasp? A joy for which I have hungered for three long years! Then you promised that the sweetness of these lips would be for me alone, and now that I have come to claim the fulfilment of the pledge you gave me, I receive cold words and scornful glances."

"Gerald, you are mad!" cried the girl, in terror lest someone should enter the room and see them. "In pity, release me—you have forgotten yourself. You are cruel."

"I have forgotten nothing, save that to-morrow we part! But for this moment you are mine—mine!" exclaimed Gerald. "Marian, do not grudge me this mite of happiness, for he will possess you during all the future, while I must be content with the memory of that which I have lost!"

"Let me go, Gerald," she pleaded again. "Someone will see us."

"Let them; let *him* come and see you in your rightful place," retorted Gerald recklessly. "Oh, Marian, how can you sell yourself to that old man? What has come over you that you can find in his withered life, and empty title, a recompense for your youth, beauty, and stainless womanhood? Oh, my darling, cannot you see that he cares for no one but himself?"

"I am perfectly aware of the gentleman's motive in desiring to marry me, just as everyone else is," she answered, a little frightened by the stern look that had settled on his face, and the unflinching gaze bent upon her. "It isn't complimentary to a woman, nor could it possibly prove agreeable to one who, from her earliest infancy, was taught to hold honour and virtue, mind and soul, above worldly position, purple and gold.

"I doubt that any girl today is so unsophisticated, so devoid of natural reasoning powers that she fails to detect the genuine from the counterfeit. It is a plain business transaction in which sentiment plays no part, and if the purchaser secures all he wants and the seller is likewise satisfied, then they are quits.

"Others have sold themselves knowingly, willingly, have counted the cost and considered the prize worth the sacrifice, why should not I if I wish?" She raised her head and looked at him.

"Yes, why?" he repeated after her slowly.

The words so quietly uttered cut like a keen blade, yet his manner piqued her pride and urged her to further malice. Compelling her eyes to meet his steady regard, she flung another taunt into his face.

"Love and marriage do not always go hand-in-hand; a man may love one woman but find it more to his interest to wed some other one; I have no means of knowing that other men, if less frank, are not impelled by the same spirit that animates my ancient moneyed suitor."

There was no mistaking the implied accusation contained in the words, and the face she gazed at flushed, then every vestige of colour receded and left it white.

There was a quick indrawing of the breath as if it had received a sudden shock, that momentarily confused and surprised him, and into his eyes there crept a shadow of mute wonder and pain.

"I did not think of that, Marian, and I should never have thought that you would either," came the answer. The passion that had been surging through his heart died, leaving behind sorrow and pity for her and himself.

"When the news reached me long ago on the other side of the world that Marian Wybrant was to marry a nobleman, I did not believe it, I trusted you too implicitly. I felt that if such were true you would inform me of it, as certainly your promise gave me the right to know.

"At our parting you asked for three years to test your love and mine. I waited the full time, God knows how

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impatiently, but at last it was over and I came for my final answer.

"That you could change, that you should choose another was very possible, but surely you could have told me that such was the case; instead you met me as a stranger, and treated me as someone guilty of wrongdoing. Was that fair, Marian? Is it just to condemn me without a hearing? Why I don't even know of what I am accused."

He paused, hoping she might make some answer, but although she felt the justice of his appeal, and was already repenting her hasty, ungenerous insinuations, she made no reply.

"I never stopped to consider my position as a poor, struggling artist," continued Gerald, in the same quiet, even tone, drawing a step nearer to her and trying to read in the averted face some sign of relenting. "Strange, but it never occurred to me that I might be looked upon as mercenary because Fate had willed it that I should love a girl who some day was destined to be an heiress; for it seems that as long as I can remember but two things filled my thoughts—you and my art."

"Are you sure?" interrupted Marian, the desire to hear him speak of the woman she imagined her rival, overcoming her determination not to be the first to broach the subject.

"I am sure," he returned, with calm emphasis. "And now that I have what I came for, there is no necessity to fore you longer with my presence. This is not my first bailure, however," he added wearily, "and doubtless it will not be the last; but its pain will linger and be hard to endure!"

"But Madeline will help you bear it, and comfort you for my loss," said Marian, as he turned and walked towards the door.

Gerald stood for an instant like a person stunned. Those few involuntary words were a revelation. In the habitually soft, musical voice there echoed a note of unmistakable jealousy, bitter and despairing. Then he remembered the innocent one whose name she had spoken.

"How dare you speak of her in that fashion?" he demanded, wheeling round on Marian. "What do you know about Madeline that you bring up her name here? Has she anything to do with you or me—with your broken faith? No, but even you must cast a stone at that child of misfortune! Poor Madeline, would to Heaven I knew where you were this night!"

Gerald went to the window and gazed with sorrowful wistfulness out upon the snow-clad landscape.

"I know nothing about the person except what others have said," said Marian coldly. "The names of Gerald Loraine and his beautiful model have been public property for some time, and they who talked seemingly knew——"

"Hush!" he interposed. "I know what you are going to say—it is the old, old story of the artist in love with the maid who poses for him. The story is old enough to be new again, and absurd enough for a joke."

"But do you?" The question seemed literally forced from her lips, so mad was her desire to hear a denial. "I have heard it reiterated everywhere I went. Tell me, Gerald?"

She drew nearer, looking at him with her soul in her eyes, while a desperate fear tugged at her heart.

Gerald was touched by the unconscious confession; joy thrilled through every nerve and fibre of his being, he longed to take her in his arms; but with an effort he controlled the impulse, and responded calmly:

"Yes, I do love Madeline as a friend or brother might. Her beauty I admired as I love and admire the wild grandeur of the mountains, or the perfect loveliness of that flower upon your breast; and her spirit matched the setting. That was all; Madeline liked me in return, but the one great love that a woman gives, was won before I had ever seen her. There was a husband and child——"

"A husband and child!" she gasped. "Oh, how miserably mean I have been—how cruelly unjust!"

"Yes, unjust, Marian," said Gerald softly. "This girl is no older than yourself, yet she had endured more wretchedness in her short life than you can even conceive of. Her husband was stricken down by an accident at the mills where he was making for her and his child a good living, and left a hopeless invalid, to be a burden upon the wife he idolised. For his sake and that of the helpless little one, she serves me as model."

Marian remorsefully turned up to him a face that the flickering firelight revealed wet with tears, holding out her hands with a repentant gesture:

"I—I don't deserve it, but—but, oh, Gerald, forgive me! —it drove me almost distracted to hear everybody saying that you loved——"

He did not wait for her to finish, but catching her to his breast, smothered the words on her lips.

"Is it true, Marian, that the poor, struggling artist is cared for when you have so many of these great titled knights at your feet?" he cried.

"Can you ask, Gerald?" was all she answered.

Nellie G. Coleman.

A Little Misunderstanding.

Which Originated in a Little Miss Understanding Too Much.

Freda and Dora Cuthbert were sisters, and furthermore they were both very pretty. Freda was twenty-one years of age, and fair. Dora was sixteen, and dark. They were the only children of a wealthy merchant, a widower, who lived in a large mansion somewhere in the Northern part of the county of Middlesex.

Now, how this story came to be written originates in the fact that Freda Cuthbert had lost her heart to a Mr. Wilfred Maitland, who was a doctor. In addition, this gentleman reciprocated the feeling, whilst neither knew how affairs were with each other, so to speak.

Wilfred Maitland was certainly an attractive man, and presumably that was why Dora Cuthbert gave her youthful heart to him without his being aware of the fact.

Thus we have a triangular love affair. Freda and Dora both love Wilfred; Wilfred loves Freda; Wilfred does not love Dora; Freda does not know Wilfred loves her, and *vice versa*; neither does Freda know Dora loves Wilfred; Dora, however, is fully aware of Freda's feelings and resents them.

I hope you have understood this somewhat tangled statement.

At "The Briars," which is the name of Mr. Cuthbert's house, they have a telephone, which telephone is an unwitting factor to this story.

It was two days before Christmas that the tinkle of the telephone bell caused Dora to jump up from her seat by the fire, and rush to answer the ring.

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"Hullo, is that 'The Briars'?"

"Yes, who are you?"

"Wilfred Maitland," came the reply. "I want to speak to Miss Dora."

"That's me," came the prompt, albeit ungrammatical reply.

"Oh, how do you do, Miss Dora? I say, I want you to do a little favour for me, will you?"

"With pleasure, Mr. Maitland."

"Thank you so much. I am sending a little Christmas present for your sister. I want it to surprise her, so, if you don't mind, I will send it to you, and you can give it to her on Christmas Day."

Dora's face went red with vexation as she heard this request, and her little foot tapped the floor angrily. However, she did not permit her annoyance to be heard in her voice as she replied:

"Very well, Mr. Maitland. You send it addressed to me, and I shall know what to do with it."

"Thank you very much, Miss Dora," came Maitland's voice over the wires. "Merry Christmas to you."

"Thanks, same to you! Good-bye," answered Dora.

"Good-bye!"

Then the bell tinkled again.

"A present for Freda," muttered Dora, "and from him, too. Ugh! I could——" She paused, and then began to smile. "But perhaps he will send me one, too. I'll wait and see."

On the following afternoon a small parcel addressed to Dora arrived by special messenger. She took it up to her room and eagerly opened it.

"Oh!" she gasped as she saw an exquisitely wrought chain to which was attached a glistening diamond pendant. "Oh, how lovely!"

After feasting her eyes on the present for some while, she turned her attention to the note which accompanied it. This was very short.

"Dear Miss Dora,—*You know what to do with the inclosed. I am unexpectedly called away to the country for Christmas. My address will be 'The Grange, Lonsby Hill, Berkshire.' With best wishes for a happy Christmas.—Believe me, yours sincerely,* "Wilfred Maitland."

"And this is for Freda?" she muttered, as she gazed at the handsome gift. A wave of jealous anger rushed through her, and she clenched her fists, her eyes blazing.

"She sha'n't have it unless he's sent me something," she whispered through her set teeth.

Dora Cuthbert's temper had always been a great trial to Mr. Cuthbert, and he had endeavoured to curb it, but had failed. Now she was the picture of simmering wrath, with her dark eyes flashing with tears of anger.

Christmas morning dawned. Dora was downstairs early, and eagerly examined the many presents that had fallen to her lot, but there was nothing from Wilfred Maitland beyond a card. Concealing her vexation, she hastened back to her room, and took out the chain and pendant.

"Freda shall pay for having it," she muttered. "I'll do it, yes, I'll do it."

In her outspoken thoughts she was referring to a plan which she had formulated during the night. She read and re-read the letter, and was apparently satisfied with the result. Then she placed Wilfred's present around her neck, and, with the letter grasped in her hand, she sought Freda's room, for she knew that her sister had not gone downstairs yet.

"Merry Christmas, Dora," cried Freda. "I'm just coming down. I've had a lovely lot of presents, father sent them up to me."

Before Dora could answer, Freda had caught sight of the diamond pendant.

"Oh, Dora!" she exclaimed rapturously. "How beautiful? Whoever gave you that?"

"Wilfred Maitland."

"What!"

"Why, you seem surprised, Freda. Yes, Wilfred sent it with this note." She handed Freda the letter which Wilfred had sent to her. Then she stood and watched her sister's pale face, while she gloated over her triumph.

With wistful eyes Freda read the letter, and all the colour left her face. An involuntary sigh rose to her lips, but she checked it as she cried,

"But, Dora, why did he send you this?"

"Why?" questioned her sister in apparently surprised tones. "Why do men send girls presents?"

"But you're only a child, Dora."

"Oh?"

"Still, it's very nice of Mr. Maitland."

"Am I only a child, Freda? Do you think Wilfred would have sent me this if he had thought so. What a pity it is he had to go away so soon."

Dora walked towards the door as she spoke. Then, with a sudden cruel whim, she raised the pendant to her lips and went out.

Freda stood still for a few moments as Dora had left her. Then she threw herself on her bed in an agony of grief.

"Oh, Wilfred," she moaned, "I love you so!"

Presently she stood up, and, with a queer little shrug of her shoulders, she laughed.

"Oh, well," she muttered. "What does it matter? I I don't care, no, not a bit."

But she did, and in her heart of hearts she knew it.

Meanwhile, Dora had returned to her room full of gratification. She replaced the present in its case, and then sat down to think.

"It's a good job I'm going abroad with aunt in a fortnight," she murmured. "There will be a terrible fuss if it comes out, but by the time I return they will have forgotten it. Ugh! I hate him!"

With a rapid change characteristic of her temperament, Dora's infatuation for Wilfred had turned into fierce hate.

"I'd better tell Freda to keep it dark for the present," she went on, still speaking her thoughts aloud.

She met her sister in the corridor. To Dora's discomfiture, Freda showed no signs of being at all upset.

"Look here, Freda," she said. "I don't want you to say anything to father about Wilfred's present to me. Not yet, at any rate. Do you understand?"

"Oh, perfectly!" answered Freda. "I shall not concern myself with it in any way. As a matter of fact, I had completely forgotten about it."

Dora, however, immediately saw how deep her shaft had gone home, despite her sister's calm exterior, and her wicked little spirit rejoiced exceedingly.

Christmas Day passed very slowly for Freda, she could hardly call to mind a more miserable Christmas. Boxing Day went in a similarly dreary manner, leaving Freda more sad than ever.

Away down in the country Wilfred Maitland looked eagerly for a letter from Freda, but none came, and it was two days since Christmas.

"I suppose I ought not to have given her that," he mused. "Just like me, impetuous, and then I spoil everything."

At that moment a message came that he was wanted on the telephone.

"Is that Mr. Maitland?" came a voice, rather faintly.

"Yes."

"I'm Dora Cuthbert. I'm speaking from home."

"Oh, yes!" answered Wilfred, and his heart gave a great leap.

"Are you going to be at the Coleridges' ball on Friday?"

"Yes," he replied. "Are you going?"

"Oh, rather?"

"And your sister, as well?"

"Yes," replied Dora. "We shall see you then, I suppose?"

"Oh, I am certain to be there!"

"Good-bye, Mr. Maitland, till Friday."

"Good-bye," he answered in puzzled tones.

He replaced the receiver and walked thoughtfully away. Then a light seemed to dawn on him.

"Of course," he cried, "that's it. Hardly liked to write to me, I expect."

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At the other end of the wire Dora was laughing silently as she walked from the instrument.

"Just been speaking to Wilfred," she said to her sister shortly afterwards.

"What, is he here?" cried Freda, whilst a vivid blush suffused her countenance.

"Oh, no! He spoke to me on the telephone from Berkshire," answered Dora. "He told me he would be at the Coleridges' ball on Friday."

"Oh, yes!" murmured Freda in reply, whilst she made a mental note not to go to the ball.

If the careful reader has noticed, it will be seen that Dora has not told an untruth at all. But all that she has said has been calculated to be understood in an erroneous manner. For instance, she said that Wilfred had sent her the chain and pendant. So he had. Thus she consoled herself as she ruminated over all she was doing, and began to grow aghast at all that was happening and would happen.

Once she had made up her mind to make a clean breast of it all to Freda, but the latter only added to her own unhappiness by unwittingly frustrating Dora. It happened in this manner.

"Freda," said Dora, "aren't you sorry Wilfred did not send you anything?"

"Sorry, why should I be sorry?"

"Well, he sent me that lovely pendant and chain——"

"My dear Dora," broke in Freda rather sharply, "If Mr. Maitland chooses to throw away costly presents on children who have not yet completed their education, in what manner does it concern me?"

Dora's face went white with anger, and with a malevolent glance at her sister she left the room, all feelings of repentance gone from her. And Freda—must I record it—well, Freda went to her room and sobbed as though her heart would break, whilst down in Berkshire, Wilfred went to and fro with a light heart and happy face.

When Friday came round Freda pleaded a headache, and declared her intention of staying at home. Consequently Mr. Cuthbert and Dora went on to the ball alone, which was exactly as Dora had anticipated.

Wilfred Maitland had returned from Berkshire that afternoon. He had rooms in a house at High Barnet, which was several miles away from "The Briars." The mansion wherein the ball was to take place was very close to the Cuthberts' home, and Wilfred had to pass "The Briars" to reach his destination.

At the ball Dora Cuthbert watched for the appearance of Wilfred Maitland. Her plan was to make him think, although she would not actually say it, that Freda would not come to the ball when she heard he was coming.

She watched the entrance to the ballroom, every moment growing angrier. But Wilfred did not appear, and her venomous appetite remained unappeased.

As Wilfred passed the entrance to "The Briars," he decided that he would call in and accompany the Cuthberts to the ball. But, as he passed in at the west entrance to the grounds, Mr. Cuthbert and Dora in the carriage passed out of the east entrance. However, Wilfred was not to know that, as he made his inquiry from the footman.

"Mr. Cuthbert and Miss Dora have gone out, sir, but Miss Cuthbert is in," the footman informed him.

Freda in! What did this mean? Was she not going to the ball? But Dora had told him that they were both going. Perhaps he had really offended her, and she was not going for that reason.

These and a host of other thoughts rushed through Wilfred's brain as he heard the footman's reply. Then, all in a moment, he resolved that he would hesitate no longer, but would see Freda and find out for himself how matters really stood.

"Will you tell Miss Cuthbert I wish to see her?" he said.

The man departed on his errand, and presently came back with the reply that Miss Dora had gone to the ball.

"But I wish to see Miss Freda Cuthbert," Wilfred said, "not Miss Dora. Will you please say that?"

The footman went away once more, and presently returned with the message that Miss Cuthbert would see him. Wilfred followed the man into the library where Freda was seated before a huge fire.

"Good evening, Mr. Maitland," said Freda in level tones, as the footman closed the door.

Then they stood and looked at each other, both feeling very nervous, neither knowing what to say. At last Freda spoke.

"When I sent that message out I was under the impression that you wished to see Dora, and not me."

"I was not aware," he replied in slightly nettled tones, "that I have shown such a marked preference for your sister's society."

"That is hardly a question we need discuss," said Freda in a dignified manner.

"I must have offended her," he thought. "However am I to find out?"

Once again they faced each other, quite at a loss for words.

"Are you not going to the ball?" said Freda at last. "You will be late; I expect Dora will be waiting for you."

"Dora again!" cried Wilfred. "Why do you continually refer to Dora and myself in such a marked way?"

"Well, you see," commenced Freda, now somewhat ill at ease. "I thought that—er—you rather liked Dora."

"I like your little sister, of course I do," he answered in puzzled tones.

"Well, Mr. Maitland," cried Freda, "I should think you do, considering your present to her at Christmas."

"My present to her at Christmas?" he repeated, more mystified than ever.

"Yes, surely you remember? Or do you give away so many presents to your girl friends?" Freda replied somewhat sarcastically.

"I do not remember giving Dora anything," he said.

"Then you must evidently be quite accustomed to give away diamond pendants and gold chains," cried Freda, stung to angry utterance by his apparent unconcern.

"What!" he cried. "I gave Dora a diamond pendant? Do you mean to say that she kept——" he paused and stared in amazement at Freda.

"Well, Mr. Maitland, she showed me your letter and present. But perhaps I ought not to have said anything; it was meant to be a secret, wasn't it?"

He was still gazing at her in undisguised astonishment, too astounded to speak.

"Why," he said at last, "I only sent one present at Christmas, and that was to you."

"To me?" she cried.

"Yes, I asked Dora on the telephone to give it you. I sent a note as well."

"B—but Dora said you sent it to her."

"So I did, but to give to you."

"Oh!" cried Freda, she could say nothing more.

Somehow her heart grew light, and the dead weight of oppression was gone from her.

"Yes, Freda," went on Wilfred. "I sent it to you, dear, because I love you."

"You do?" she cried joyously, and then they both laughed, and gazed into each other's eyes.

"Yes," he cried. "I love you, Freda."

"Oh!" was once more the only reply she could make, but her eyes gave him all the answer he wanted.

"My Freda," he whispered as he took her in his arms, and then their lips met and they tasted the joy that only comes to man and woman when true love meets true love.

"But what about Dora?" Freda said some time later on, when they both occupied the same armchair before the fire.

"I cannot understand it," he said. "I must have offended her in some way, and it was a childish spite on her part."

But Freda was a woman, and she knew her sex as man can never do; therefore she knew different.

"Let us forgive her, dear," Freda said.

"Very well, but mind you get back my Christmas present," was his laughing reply.

And there we will leave them.

B. N. E.

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The Miser's Christmas Holiday.

Telling of a Good Deed Well Done.

LONDON is frost and fog-bound; and Morgan Carlaw, money-lender and miser, bending over his well-thumbed ledgers shivers with the cold.

The room he calls his "office"—one in a great nest of more or less reputable chambers within sound of St. Paul's chimes—is a small one, but the fire in the dust-choked grate is too small even for it, and the solitary gas-jet that fights against the fog diffuses little heat.

As his master shivers, so does Godfrey Chatterton, his clerk, scowling in turn at the miserable fire, the feeble light, and the safe in the corner.

It seems strange that Morgan Carlaw, owner of the bonds and securities in that safe—totalling how much he alone knows—should deny himself ordinary creature comforts on such an inclement December 24th as this; but the miser's mind is warped out of all reason by long years of business selfishness, and solitude, and he grudges the spending of every penny.

There is but one redeeming feature about him, his clerk thinks. For the sake of appearances he dresses, if not well, at least tidily and clean. Lean, keen-jawed, grey-haired, iron-souled, methodical, merciless—that is how his clerk sums him up.

Godfrey Chatterton himself is also old, grey, and cadaverous, eking out a miserable existence on a mean salary, because his employer knows certain things about his past.

Business is slack this morning, and callers few. The spider at the centre of his web is not perturbed, for at the close of the year his victims do not care for many personal interviews; but in fastening his strands yet more securely round them per post and legal process, he always finds something to do.

Chatterton is glad when his employer, five minutes later than his usual time, goes out to dinner, leaving him in charge of the office and in sole control of the coal-box.

Outside the snow lies thick on neglected pavements, and Morgan Carlaw, buttoning his overcoat closely on his spare figure, creeps carefully along the dim streets to the cheap cook-shop he favours with his mean patronage.

So dense is the fog that traffic is almost suspended, and the shops, with their outspread Christmas cheer, make but a poor show in the gloom.

A street away from the restaurant, a small boy, coming round a corner, runs up against Mr. Carlaw, and but for the latter's outstretched hand, would fall from the recoil. He is a very small boy, of puny limbs and pinched face, with blue nose, and eyes that give evidence of recent tears.

"You should look where you are going, boy," says the moneylender sharply; "especially in this fog."

"Please, sir, I didn't hear you coming. Can you tell me the way to the big stores? I have asked ever so many, and they all tell me to keep on this way."

Morgan Carlaw looks closely at the small, cold, drawn face and the big, pleading eyes, a strange expression coming into his own.

"What's your name, my boy?" he asks quickly, but more kindly than usual for him.

"Gifford—Teddy Gifford—sir," says the boy, wondering.

Though the idea has occurred to him, Carlaw starts. These are *her* eyes; that is *her* very expression; the boy's voice is like her voice; and Gifford is her name now. And where has he heard the name during the past year?

"Come in here, Teddy," he says, taking the boy's hand and leading him into the shelter of an archway. "Now tell me, is your mother's name Mary?"

"Yes, sir. Father used to call her Mary."

"Umph! What do you want to go to the big stores for? What stores?"

"Please, I don't know," says the boy in a quavering tone, reverting to his misery. "Mother's poor, now—now father's gone, and we can't get nice things now to eat—and she cries often—and I heard Lizzie—that's the little girl in the next room—say that people get Santa Claus from the big stores at Christmas. And this morning a letter came, a blue one from Mr. Carlaw, who wants some money—and mother cried because she hadn't any, and I thought I'd go and find Santa Claus and ask him to bring us some money instead of other things."

The little fellow stops, out of breath with so unusually long a speech, and tears tremble in his eyes.

"Do you think he will do it, if I ask him?" he says.

"No, I am afraid not, Teddy," says the miser, in a tone that sounds strange even to his own ears. "He doesn't take notice of anyone but grown-up people. You had better be going back to mother, or she will think you are lost. It is not so dark now, see."

"I must go back if mother wants me; I never thought of that," says Teddy; then adds wistfully: "But will you go and ask Santa Claus for me, sir—you are a grown-up man, aren't you?"

"I think so," says Morgan Carlaw. "I will ask him for you. You must run back now. Wait a bit, though."

He hurries the boy to a confectioner's, goes in with a gait and air long foreign to him, and purchases a loaf of bread and another of cake. These he gives to Teddy, with a sense of immense sacrifice, and scarcely hearing or heeding the astonished recipient's grave thanks, hastens him off on his

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homeward way. Then, with the same strange gait and air, he pursues his own journey to the cook-shop and orders his usual dinner.

He eats the niggardly meal and goes back to the office like a man in a waking dream. The sudden revivifying of an old memory has pierced his soul to the core. Scenes of the past come before him—the past that he had thought buried out of sight and mind.

He had thought, as others had done, that his soul was all shrivelled to dry husk; and he finds that he is yet human within.

A few moments of reminiscence, aided by the speaking likeness of little Teddy's face, has undone the work of years of miserly scheming.

Morgan Carlaw has not always been as he is now. He remembers, as plainly as though it had only been yesterday, his courtship of Mary Howarth; their weekly walks and talks; some nights at a suburban theatre; a few excursions to Margate, and once up the river; her unfailing freshness of spirits and charm of face; his dim knowledge that she was too bright and good for his even then sordid temperament.

He remembers how the brief dream of happiness passed, and one more worthy of her, more fitting to win her love, had taken her from him. He remembers, bitterly, how he resolved to cast her out of his life, to crush down every thought of her, and to be revenged on the man who had robbed him of happiness.

He remembers, remorsefully now, how he compassed that man's ruin, and struck Mary down to poverty at the same time; and how, in a moment of repentant sanity, he made a will bequeathing all his possessions to Mary or her children, and would even have helped her temporarily had she not refused his aid with anger, and moving to another address, escaped his further notice.

It is some consolation to him now to reflect that he had never told her his profession, or his professional name—Carlaw. She would never think of him as the vulture he knows himself to be.

He knows how he has given himself up, body and soul, to money-getting, until avarice has become both first and second nature.

And he remembers having "business transactions" with several Giffords during the past year; and Teddy's pitiful story of the blue letter that made his mother cry, brings to his mind that one of them was a widow who had tried to raise money on a disputed will of her husband's parents.

He had put Chatterton in charge of the affair when the payments began to fail, with instructions to go on without reference to the woman's appeals for delay—she never came personally, always writing.

He sees it all clearly now, as he goes through the yellow mist and smudgy snow to his den—his Mary, left alone in the world, had sunk from poverty to penury, had tried to obtain the money left to her husband, but had been defrauded by his family; and finally, had borrowed, unwittingly, of *him*.

It was *his* order that had dispatched the pitiless letter that had sent Teddy into the streets to seek Santa Claus.

It affords him a sort of negative satisfaction to know that he has not destroyed the will made in Mary's favour. He had meant to do, but had put it off, thinking that there was ample time.

His first words, when he gets back to the office, startle Chatterton more than anything he has heard for many a year.

"You can go as soon as you like to-day, Chatterton," he says, "and I sha'n't want you back till Thursday."

"But what about business?" asks the clerk, staring incredulously at his employer. "We have always balanced the books on Christmas Day. It'll be the first time we've had a day off since I came here! Are you actually going to have a holiday?"

"Yes; I'm going to take a holiday," says Carlaw, testily. "I suppose I can do as I like without asking you? Take yourself off, and you needn't come on Friday if you don't like."

"All right, Mr. Carlaw," says the clerk, quickly changing his tone. "No offence meant. I'll come Friday. Merry Christmas!"

Morgan Carlaw does not answer this grim pleasantry. His mind is still busy with the past, and sub-consciously working out a problem of the future.

He sits in the decrepit chair beside the desk for more than an hour after Chatterton's departure, in a fixed attitude—his chin on his collar, his hands grasping the chair arms.

The fire goes out, its red heart slowly dying to grey ash; and the growing darkness outside seems merely accentuated by the puny gas jet over the desk.

At last he gets up, seizes pen and paper, and writes a brief note to his solicitor, then takes from a pigeon-hole a dust-grimed document marked "Last Will and Testament of William Carter, *alias* Morgan Carlaw," and incloses it with the letter, which he goes out and posts.

At any rate, that is safe now from Chatterton's possible tampering; and when he dies Mary's troubles will be at an end.

Back again, he sets to work to balance his books alone, poring over apparently interminable agreements, securities, deeds, approaching a total that he knows will over-reach five figures—a total that will all be Mary's.

Ten o'clock comes—eleven—twelve, and Christmas Eve passes into Christmas Day; two, three, four, five, and joy-bells ring in the city, and life becomes more evident in the snow-whitened streets; and still the miser toils on in gloom and cold, shivering, with cramped fingers, over the details of his hoarded wealth.

As the figures grow, he gloats over them in ecstasy, forgetting his discomfort, forgetting all but his overmastering avarice.

Six, seven, eight, strike and on the eve of nine o'clock on Christmas morning his task is over.

He sits up, stretching and chafing his chilled and aching limbs; then putting the balance sheet into a big blue envelope addresses to his solicitor and sealing it with red wax, pigeon-holes it.

Outside the snow has ceased falling, the fog has gone, and people are exchanging the old-time greetings in the fresh, cold, sunlit day.

A ray of sunlight, escaping the forbidding roof-angles around, shoots at last into Morgan Carlaw's office, and piercing its gloom and floating dust, settles on the chimney-piece.

The miser, seeing it, extinguishes the wasteful gas-jet, and takes from the crowded shelf a small, dark-blue bottle, black with smoke. He brushes it carefully with his coat-sleeve, exposing to view the red label upon it, and at what he reads on the label, smiles.

Yes, he thinks, he has chosen well. He is glad he made the will in Mary's favour; gladder that he had never altered it. It is the best way he can atone for the past—can prove himself worthy of something higher than greed of gain.

All his wealth will be Mary's—all—when he is dead. It is better than helping her whilst he is alive—and he always objects to charity, on principle—and he feels sure she would refuse his aid, even if offered.

Yes, it is best as he has chosen. Whilst he lives this wealth is his—all his; after his death it will be hers, and she will know at last that he is not quite all mercenary husk.

He picks up the little bottle, regarding it as a silent friend and long companion who promises a final consolation after the wreck of his wasted years, and uncorking it, sniffs the contents; then, with a quick, resolute effort, drains it.

A moment later he falls, face forward, on the desk. The ray of sunlight, journeying across the room, reaches the label of the empty bottle at the silent man's elbow, and picks out in letters of black on a dull red ground the one word: "Poison."

Morgan Carlaw, money-lender and miser, has set out upon his Christmas holiday; and before the New Year dawns little Teddy Gifford knows that the kind gentleman's intercession with Santa Claus has not been in vain.

Geo. Wallis.

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A Sense of Humour.

The Story of a Literary Lion.

By W. PETT RIDGE.

THE express train pulled up at the small station; the engine performing the act with a suggestion of unwillingnesss, as one unaccustomed to check itself at anything below the rank of a junction. The guard hurried to a first-class compartment, and Mr. Andrew Tite stepped out. The guard placed the portmanteau on the rustic garden-seat, and with one hand held his whistle to his mouth; with the other he received Mr. Tite's donation. A porter of amazing youthfulness strolled up from the signal-box at the end of the platform as the train started.

"Now then, ten-twenty," said the infantile porter to the guard, with much truculence, "'urry up."

The train hastened away, and the small porter watched it.

"That train ain't stopped 'ere," he said, with a reminiscent air, to Mr. Andrew Tite, "not for the last free months. Last gent it stopped for was Sir 'Enry——"

"I want this portmanteau taken up to the Unicorn," interrupted Mr. Tite sharply. "Do you know it?"

"Well," said the boy, "I ort to."

"Certainly you ought. But do you?"

"There ain't many men that knows the Unicorn better than me," said the small porter, with a knowing smile. "If I don't know the Unicorn, why nobody don't know it."

"That's all right, then. Bring this up there as soon as you can, and I'll walk on."

"You go through this orchard," explained the boy, "and you bear jest the least bit to the left, and you come to a——"

"I know the way quite well," said Andrew Tite. "I used to live here."

"What name, may I ask?" said the boy. He took a piece of chalk from his pocket.

"Tite," said Andrew Tite.

"It's new to me," remarked the boy. And he wrote carefully on the portmanteau with a piece of chalk one word:

TIGHT.

Mr. Andrew Tite crossed the line and opened the gate of the orchard. He had had so much of praise during the past year that he should have been glad to be exempt from it for a time; yet, somehow, he could not help feeling disappointment at the small porter's ignorance of his fame. To come back after a few years of absence to the village where he had spent his early days had occurred to him as a pleasing and an impressive thing to do, and though he had a special difficulty to face in the shape of a visit to the doctor's house—Florence Saxby was a niece of Doctor Parr—even there it would be agreeable to hear their opinions of his books. What he proposed to do was to call after lunch and just stay for half-an-hour or so.

"Poor little Florence!" said Mr. Andrew Tite.

He kicked a stone out of his way and adjusted his tie. It was rather a large flowing tie with a fine suggestion of the Boulevards about it, and when, of late, lady journalists had interviewed the newest literary lion, his tie was always made the subject of a separate paragraph.

"It's hard on her, of course," acknowledged Andrew Tite to himself. "Very hard, and very disappointing. And really up to last year I thought I should have kept up the correspondence and the love of years ago. But, good gracious, such a lot of things have happened since then. For instance, there's Miss Vanbury."

It was surprising to find how very small the small village seemed. In five minutes he was near to the one hotel of the place, and he had always had an impression that it was quite a long distance from the station. He looked up at his old school-house, and made a mental note to call in to-morrow and request for the boys a special half-holiday. This would be a genial, semi-regal, inexpensive action, which would be in every way gratifying.

At the Unicorn, a pleasant scent of lunch. A bustle and hurrying to and fro of white-aproned maids. A look of gay expectancy on the face of Mrs. Hostess, mingled with some nervousness.

"This way, sir," said Mrs. Hostess, bustling out of her room into the dim entrance. "We had your wire and the room is ready, and we sent word to Jim Turley, and he's going to call later on, and he says the links are in perfect condition, and there's no reason, Sir Henry, why you shouldn't begin to-morrow, and Jim Turley has got a cousin who can——"

"I beg your pardon," said Andrew crossly. "Pray don't talk so fast, and pray tell me what in the world you are talking about. I'm not Sir Henry Anybody."

"I'm afraid I am," said a big voice behind him. "Hullo, Tite, is that you? What the dickens are you doing here? What has induced you to——"

"I was born here," said Andrew. He dropped his pince-nez and took limply the hand which the breezy youth offered.

"Well, that's some excuse, certainly. Even a novelist, I suppose, must be born somewhere."

"Perhaps you will allow me, Rowlands, to ask what is your reason for coming to a place like this. It isn't Tooting Common, and it isn't Chingford."

"Wish to goodness it were. The links here are not good, but I'm down here partly for a bit of quiet practice, and partly for—well, that's about all. It does one good to have a change."

"What I want just now," said Andrew, "is not so much change as lunch."

"I'll see to that, sir," said Mrs. Hostess, interposing. "At the same table?"

"At the same table," said Rowlands. "Tite, you will be my guest for this feed?"

Andrew Tite fixed his pince-nez carefully on the bridge of his nose, and surveyed the impulsive youth before him. They happened to be members of the same club in town, where they knew just enough of each other to quarrel on political questions. Rowlands was a man so accustomed to score at golf that he kept up the method in other games, and this brought him into conflict with other masterful players.

"Be my guest at lunch?" repeated Rowlands.

"You're very good," said Andrew Tite. "I will."

"In a quarter of an hour, sir," said Mrs. Hostess anxiously, "and not a moment later."

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"I'll see that he is punctual," said young Sir Henry Rowlands.

They strolled down the village together, passing *en route* the doctor's house. It stood well back from the road, and Andrew Tite, trying to look through the thick, short line of trees that protected it, stopped a lecture that he was making on the subject of agricultural stupidity. The thought of the old evenings came swiftly back to him, evenings when he used to stand near the gate and a note written in a schoolgirl hand used to be passed through the branches with much elaboration of wholly unnecessary secrecy, to be answered that night by a sealed communication delivered with similar mystery.

"I think we'll turn," he said.

Rowlands went up to the gate and peered through curiously.

"Come away, Rowlands," said Andrew; "people don't care for that sort of thing here."

"Thought I saw a girl," remarked Rowlands. "Such things do grow in the country, I believe."

"Pray be careful," begged Andrew. "I know the people there."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'm hanged," said Rowlands, astonished.

At the Unicorn, such a lunch as the Unicorn had never before dreamt of. Mrs. Hostess, caring nothing at all for literary lions, had found herself spurred to most excellent performance by the presence of a baronet. There was no menu, but Mrs. Hostess obligingly came in at the beginning of the lunch, and mentioned in the manner of a dioramic lecturer, with a respect that was concentrated exclusively on Rowlands, a few of the important features.

"Fried soles," said Mrs. Hostess. "Fried soles, Sir Henry; lamb and mint sauce, game pie, Sir Henry; roast fowl, blue mange, Sir Henry, and cheese and salad. And"—this is a kind of *bon voyage* wish—"I hope it'll be to your liking, Sir Henry; and of course you, sir, as well."

Lunch, after several times threatening to come to an end, and not coming to an end, did come to an end, and the two men sat out in the shade at the entrance of the Unicorn, and lighted their cigars. The smoke went up to the nostrils of the rampant, white Unicorn over the doorway, and gave to that rare animal an increased appearance of being about to sneeze. Mrs. Hostess, red with encouraging nimble-footed white-aproned maids, went back to her room, and fanned herself with an *Advertiser*.

"And, as I say," concluded Andrew Tite, "there is something in the dull monotony of country life which seems to destroy, for those who live in it, all sense of humour."

"I see your argument," remarked Rowlands. "I daresay there's something in it."

"There's a great deal," said Andrew. "You don't know anybody here, I suppose, Rowlands?"

Rowlands blew a gentle puff of smoke at an insect on a leaf of the creeper at the doorway, and intoxicated it into somnolence before he replied.

"Nobody to speak of," he answered. "Of course you know everybody?"

"Well, no. A good many folk have died since I left."

"Because you left, perhaps."

Andrew Tite did not smile. It is never wise to encourage badinage directed against oneself.

"Who is the doctor?" asked Rowlands casually.

"Dr. Parr," said Andrew. "He has a niece who keeps house for him. That house you were peering at just now in the village. Rather decent sort of girl, too. Some pretensions to good looks."

"That's gratifying," said Rowlands, with some interest, "for all parties. And is Miss Saxby old?"

"How did you know her name was Saxby?" asked Andrew quickly.

"My dear fellow, didn't you say so?"

"She's young," said Andrew. "Still young."

"So much the better!"

It was a little irritating to Andrew, despite the fact that he had relinquished all claim to be considered Florence Saxby's *fiancé* for quite a year, to find young Rowlands showing this interest in her. But Rowlands' next remark put him again at his ease.

"I didn't tell you, perhaps, before lunch, Tite, did I? I'm going to be married next month."

"I'm glad to hear it," said Andrew, with much heartiness. "Very glad to hear it. And look here, Rowlands. I'm going to call on this Miss Saxby this afternoon. If you like, I'll take you along and introduce you."

It had suddenly occurred to him that the meeting would be less awkward if a stranger were present.

"I shall be very glad," said Rowlands. "I'm ready now, if you are."

"There's no great hurry."

"Let's go now and get it over."

So they went at once.

Dr. Parr was out. "Out," said the neat maid, "and wouldn't be back perhaps for hours upon hours. Miss Saxby? Oh, yes, she was in." The neat maid beamed in the direction of young Rowlands, who stood discreetly at the back of Andrew Tite. Would they kindly step this way?

"I hope this is not an inconvenient time to call, Florence?" said Andrew, as a slim, tall girl entered. "The fact is——"

"I'm very pleased to see an old friend at any time, Andrew."

"This is Sir Henry Rowlands. Rowlands, this is Miss Saxby. I found Rowlands at the Unicorn and I ventured to bring him along."

Rowlands said gravely tht he was very glad, and Miss Saxby, in her merry way, almost laughed with pleasure as she turned to him. It was a relief to the literary lion to find that at any rate she was in no maudlin mood.

"Are you here for long, Sir Henry?" she asked, smilingly.

"I'm here for practice. I want to score if I can this year in more ways than one."

"I hope you will succeed."

"I'm afraid Rowlands does not make himself plain," interposed Andrew.

"No one can say that I'm pretty," said Rowlands.

"What Rowlands means is," explained Andrew carefully, "that he is here practising golf, and he also intends to be married shortly."

"Next month," corroborated Rowlands.

"So soon as that?" said Florence Saxby, opening her eyes widely.

"It seems to me a long time to wait," said Rowlands.

"And you are fond of cricket, Sir Henry?"

"No, no," corrected Andrew, "not cricket. Golf."

"Of course. How stupid of me. Golf, I mean."

"I am fond of it," said Rowlands, "but just now it has the second place in my affections. The first is——"

"Andrew," exclaimed Miss Saxby, hastily, "I am forgetting you. But that only serves you right, because you had distinctly forgotten us. If it hadn't been for your books which we have found in Mudie's box and the little paragraphs about you in the papers——"

"Mr. Andrew Tite is not a Prussian," murmured Rowlands.

"Why, I am afraid we should have been disturbed about you."

"It has been rather a busy time," said Andrew Tite, importantly. "We literary men have few opportunities for cultivating the—what shall I say?"

"The garden?" suggested Rowlands.

"No, no, no. Nothing like that. For cultivating the society of our old friends I mean."

"I understand," said Miss Saxby.

"The world," went on Mr. Andrew Tite, with the frown of conscious notoriety, "the world expects a good deal from those whom it decides to honour. Directly your name gets to be known you are invited here and invited there; women journalists call and interview you——"

"Interesting," remarked Rowlands.

"Publishers pester you, editors worry you, and you don't

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know, I assure you, what it is to have in your own rooms a quiet chop from one month's end to the other."

"A quiet chop," remarked Rowlands, "is really a very pleasant companion. What I can never stand is the noisy, rollicking, talkative chop that——"

"Go on, Andrew," said Miss Saxby, interrupting Rowlands.

"I can assure you," said Mr. Tite, "that over and over again I have longed, absolutely longed, for the old quiet life in this little country village, where life goes so leisurely. The sturm and drang of London life——"

"A foreign expression, Miss Saxby," explained the other.

"Begins to tell after a while even on the strongest brain. It is like the continual clank clank of the machinery on an Atlantic liner, that never stops, night or day, from port to port. One feels at certain times that one is becoming used to it, but as a matter of fact, one never becomes used to it. Its determined, relentless, insistent clank; clank becomes a part of your existence it is true but it is always the ogre of your life, the demon that by his presence makes you old, worn and fatigued before your time."

"I always enjoy lectures," remarked Rowlands, when Andrew paused, "but I think they ought to be accompanied by pictures on a white screen, and a piano."

"So that you have had no time to write," said Miss Saxby, "anything but books?"

"Absolutely no time."

"At any rate we have not forgotten you. We have often talked about you whenever we have seen your name in the papers."

"I am glad," said Andrew, "to think that my memory has been preserved by some means."

"Do you really mean that?" she said brightly.

The challenge seemed to leave no way out.

"I mean," he said, softly, "a great deal more than that."

She smoothed the white gown she was wearing gently over her knee, and for a moment she was thoughtful.

"You can form no idea, though, Miss—Miss——" began Rowlands.

"My name is Saxby, Sir Henry."

"Miss Saxby. You can form no idea what a very important man Mr. Tite is in town. I know one or two men at the club who swear by him."

"I think I can guess. I know that when I was in town last year he was so much engaged that we saw very little of him."

"By-the-bye, Tite, are you really engaged? There was a rumour to that effect. The club fellows told me."

He picked some mignonette, and she placed it, with her old smile, in her blouse.

"If a public man," said Andrew, with some acerbity, "were to contradict all the incorrect reports that are sent round about him he would bring himself to an early end by overwork. I always argue that the private life of a public man has nothing to do with anybody but himself. Upon my word, though, nowadays that seems to be impossible."

"Shows how careful you chaps ought to be," said Rowlands. "Of course the report must be very annoying too, to Miss Vanbury."

"Was that the lady——" began Florence Saxby.

"I particularly want you, Florence," interposed Andrew hastily, "to show me, the garden round your lawn. I want to freshen my recollection of it. Rowlands, you can stay here if you like. I believe you are no lover of flowers."

"I think I would like, if Miss Saxby will excuse me."

"You will find the *Times* there, Sir Henry. I shall not keep you long."

"I hope you will," he whispered.

Miss Saxby handed the paper to Rowlands, and Rowlands, instead of taking the paper, touched her hand, and the paper dropped to the floor. Andrew picked it up.

"You are a clumsy fellow," he said.

Really it was very soothing and consoling and altogether agreeable, to be once more strolling round the small, square

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clean-shaven lawn with the slim girl in white at his side. He picked some mignonette, and she placed it, with her old smile, in her blouse.

"Do you remember when I last did that?" he asked.

"I don't think I am likely to forget. There are so few romances in one's life that it is quite easy to remember every page."

"What do you think of Rowlands?"

"He seems a straightforward sort of young man," she said, judicially, "as far as I can judge."

"He's not quite my sort," said Andrew, "but he's got a certain manner with him that enables him to get on with people. Only, of course," he laughed, "no one would claim that he was a man of intellect."

They stopped and looked through the open window into the room. Rowlands had relinquished the *Times*, and had taken up an illustrated ladies' journal, and was studying, with much interest, portraits of the current bridegrooms.

"I suppose it is natural that you should say that, Andrew, of almost anybody. Do you still live in chambers?"

"Yes, I shall live there until I cease to be a bachelor."

She looked up. He put his arm under hers and she turned to the window nervously.

"Florence, dear, I'm sorry that I behaved rather meanly to you. I ought not to have dropped you without a word of explanation. If you think you can forgive me, give me back one sprig of mignonette."

She took a sprig from her blouse without any hesitation.

"And we are good friends again?" he asked anxiously.

"Excellent friends, I hope," she said.

"I can't tell you how happy that reply makes me. I came down here to-day with the full intention of only just calling and seeing you, and now——"

Andrew was on the point of stating the truth. He stopped himself just in time.

"I say," called Rowlands from the open window, "I say. Will someone kindly tell me how it is all bridegrooms frown?"

"It is done," explained Miss Saxby, "to hide their natural gratification. I wish you would touch that gong, Sir Henry. The maid shall bring tea."

If Florence Saxby had been delightful in the garden, some superlative word was required to describe her as she presided at the tiny tea-table. The figure of Miss Vanbury (a gaunt lady of much cleverness—who wore convex glasses) forced itself upon Andrew's mind. He could see quite clearly now the mistake he had made.

"Wonder whether it's too late to repair the blunder," murmured Andrew. And he took a second cup of tea.

"I think I liked your last novel best," remarked Florence Saxby. "I fancy it shows greater insight into actual things; and there is a very pleasant strain of humour. Don't you think so, Sir Henry?"

"I can't say," confessed Rowlands, "that I've read any of them very carefully. But I daresay it is as you say, Miss Saxby. Tite is a rare man for humour. He argues that the leading characteristic of the bucolic mind is its want of that particular quality. I tell him that he is rather sweeping in his charge."

"I suppose women share that trait," said the young lady.

"It is easy to see the failings of other people," remarked Andrew with an impartial air. "I daresay as a matter of fact we all have our weaknesses. Are you keeping up your painting, Florence?"

"As well as I can. Would you care to see some of my work? Sir Henry, will you come too?"

"I don't know much about art," said Rowlands.

"Then you will be able to play critic. This way."

With Rowlands looking closely at a small portrait at one end of the small studio, Andrew found a second opportunity of speaking words of confidence. Rowlands really seemed a youth with a commendable amount of tact. When he noticed that the two were in earnest conversation near the large easel he increased his attention to the portrait.

"Florence!"

"Andrew!"

"I suppose it is quite understood that our half-engagement is at an end?"

"Oh, quite at an end."

"And there is no sort of bond between us now?"

"Excepting that of friendship, Andrew."

"There is no reason why we should not be capital friends."

"Capital friends," she agreed, smiling.

"What a good, sensible girl you are, Florence." Andrew sighed and touched lightly a fold of her white sleeve. "Do you know I have often thought of the old days, the days just after I left school, when I used to send stuff to London editors—and such stuff, too—and you and I used to wait at the post-office for the big envelopes that always came back? You were in shortish dresses then."

"I'm rather glad, I think," she said brightly, "to find that you still remember those days. I shall never forget them."

"However successful a man may become," said Andrew Tite oracularly, "he always remembers his first sweetheart."

"Especially if he marries her," suggested Florence.

"That," said Mr. Tite, "that does not affect the matter. Is this crayon work yours? It seems very fair."

The scent from the trees at the back of the house came lazily through the open window and contested in a slow, dogged way with the smell of the paint tubes. Rowlands, with his back to the two, put down the portrait and looked about for another.

"Just one more word, Florence. You were always the best of girls, and I am so glad we have not quarrelled."

"I don't think I could have done so, Andrew."

"Shall we shake hands?"

"With all the pleasure possible."

It was a small hand with a rather good ring on one of the fingers. It was a soft, white hand, too, and it lay in Andrew's with such a gentle pressure that for one moment the canvases danced before his eyes an intricate gavotte. But this was no excuse for the immediate action of Andrew Tite. In view of the existing circumstances—existing circumstances including Miss Vanbury—nothing, I am bound to say, could excuse Andrew seizing the small white hand, pressing it hurriedly to his lips, and murmuring hastily two words:

"Dearest love!"

Rowlands was really very sorry that he had dropped the canvas. He did hope that no harm was done. Miss Saxby assured him, after careful inspection, that no harm whatever had been done.

"I think we had better go, Rowlands," said Andrew Tite, with a flushed face.

"I'm ready."

"And perhaps you will let us call to-morrow, Florence?"

"I hope you will. And you too, Sir Henry."

"You're very kind, Miss Saxby. I hope we shall see each other again."

"You must try to call, Sir Henry, when my uncle is in."

"Even if he were not in——" began Rowlands.

"Now, come along, Rowlands. Good-bye, dear. Good-bye."

Andrew Tite ran back to the gate after the two had proceeded a few steps.

"May I send you a note this evening?" he asked hurriedly.

"You are one of my favourite writers," said Florence Saxby demurely.

Andrew Tite went up to his room and Rowlands, being called for by the excellent Turley, went for an hour's practice. Andrew's writing work consisted of one communication, and he did not commence that until he had walked about the room and considered a great deal. The letter began:

"Dear Miss Vanbury,—*I want to send you a few words on rather a serious matter. When you promised a few weeks since to be my wife, I*——"

There were two sheets of closely-written arguments. At the end was this:

"*Pray, therefore, consider that we are released from our engagement to each other. You are a woman of considerable*

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sense, and you will, I am sure, agree that all this is for the best.

"*My regards to your mother if she has returned from Nice. If I do not call on my return to town you will know that it is because pressure of work prevents me. With sincere regards, believe me, faithfully yours,*

"ANDREW TITE."

When he had folded this, he placed it in an envelope, addressed the envelope to—

"*The Hon. Miss Vanbury,*
"*117 Eaton Terrace,*
London, S.W.,"

and dispatched it by the postman who called at the moment for letters to take by tricycle to a post-office five miles distant, Andrew Tite felt that Volume III. of his life only remained to be penned. That evening he would write to Florence Saxby and renew his engagement with her, and——

Enter Rowlands. Rowlands, back from the links in the best of spirits, Rowlands, fanning himself with his cap, lounges on two chairs at the entrance and hails the literary man, descending the staircase in a loud, boyish way:

"Hullo, there!"

"Ah, Rowlands. Back from play?"

"Play, sir? It's hard work. Real hard work. That's what it is."

"I am rather anxious, Rowlands, to have your opinion. Can you spare a few minutes?"

"Hours."

"It won't take long. I want to know what you think of Miss Saxby."

"Miss Saxby!" said Rowlands wonderingly.

"You surely haven't forgotten the lady to whom I introduced you this afternoon?"

"Oh, that young person. You don't care for her, do you?"

"I'm surprised," said Andrew. "I should have thought she was just the kind to attract you. To me she seems the most delightful of women folk."

"Perhaps your experience has been limited, Tite."

"I don't know so much about that," answers Andrew Tite knowingly. "I know what they are pretty well. I was just wondering what most girls would say if they were proposed to by a man of position in the world."

"So far as I can judge," said Rowlands, "I should imagine that most girls would say 'Yes'."

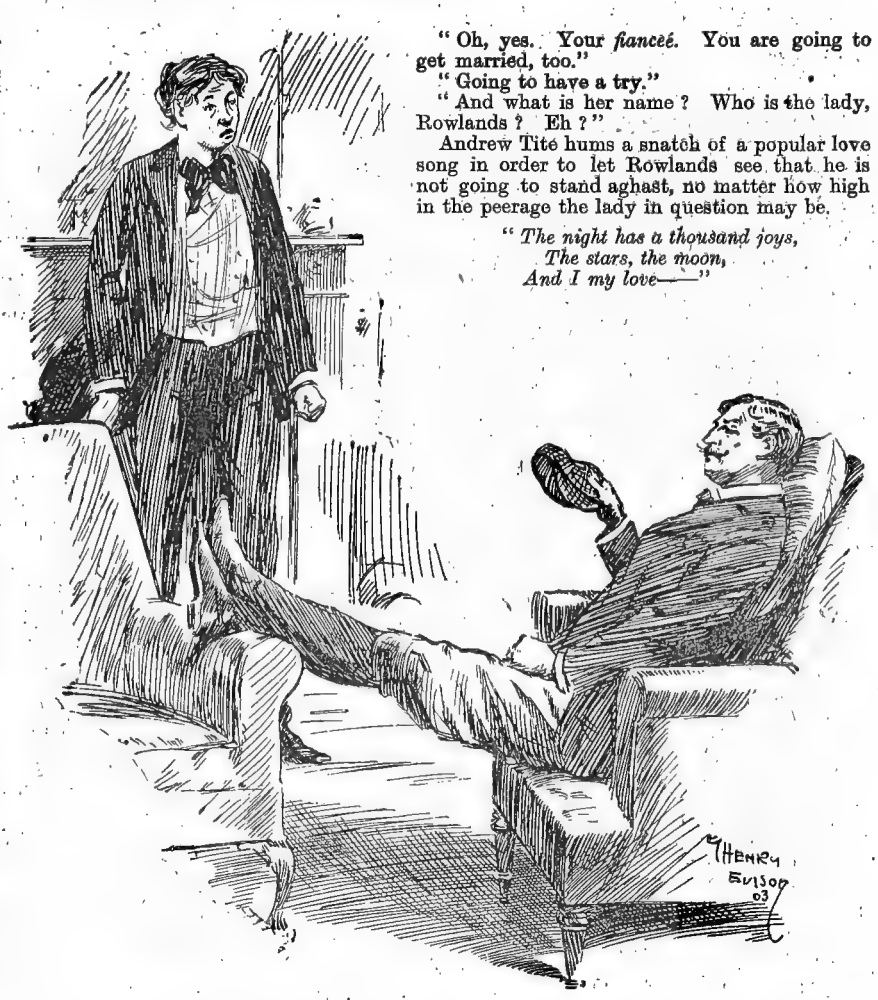
Andrew smiled.

"I don't think there's much doubt about that, Rowlands. It must be a great satisfaction for a girl to make a really good marriage. And, after all, Florence Saxby is a clever girl. Quite above the ordinary."

"I think so."

"Of course," goes on Andrew argumentatively, "all women have certain drawbacks. As I was pointing out this morning, in the case of the average provincial there is with them all that lack of a sense of humour which is so much to be deplored."

"But, Tite, I fancy there are exceptions. For instance, my *fiancée*."



"The name of the lady who is to be my dear wife," said Sir Henry, "is Florence Saxby."

"Oh, yes. Your *fiancée*. You are going to get married, too."

"Going to have a try."

"And what is her name? Who is the lady, Rowlands? Eh?"

Andrew Tite hums a snatch of a popular love song in order to let Rowlands see that he is not going to stand aghast, no matter how high in the peerage the lady in question may be.

"*The night has a thousand joys,*
The stars, the moon,
And I my love——"

"The name of the lady who is going to be my dear wife," mentions Rowlands deliberately, "and to whom I have been engaged for three months, is Miss Florence Saxby."

* * * * *

Mr. Andrew Tite caught the 5.50 p.m. back to town. The infant porter recognised him and his bag, and took charge of both with an air of extreme friendliness. The infant porter, after he had booked three passengers, and had rung a big brass bell, shouldered the bag, and as he stood on the platform by the side of Andrew Tite, waiting for the up-train, essayed to while away the time by amicable talk.

"'Ad enough of it, sir?"

Mr. Tite did not answer; being absorbed in his own thoughts.

"I say, sir." The infant porter tapped him on the arm with the familiarity of a youthful official and nodded towards the village. "I say. 'Ave y'ad enough of it?"

"I have had, my boy," said Andrew Tite gloomily, "just a little too much of it, thank you."

W. Pett Ridge.

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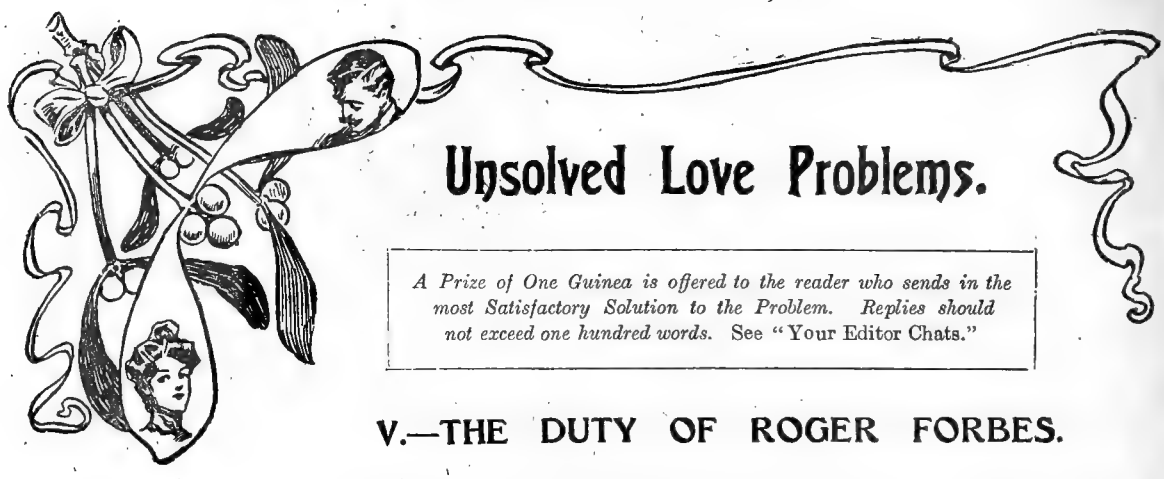

Unsolved Love Problems.

A Prize of One Guinea is offered to the reader who sends in the most Satisfactory Solution to the Problem. Replies should not exceed one hundred words. See "Your Editor Chats."

V.—THE DUTY OF ROGER FORBES.

It was with a stern look on his handsome face that the young barrister, Roger Forbes, strode up the drive to Mansfield House.

An urgent telegram from his mother had brought him down from town. He knew only too well of late years what the trouble was likely to be, and he braced himself for feeble excuses from his father, and bitter words from his mother.

"Well, mother," he exclaimed, as she came slowly across the handsome drawing-room to meet him, "what is it *this* time?"

"The end," she replied. Mrs. Forbes had been a very handsome woman, but the havoc of mental and bodily suffering had long swept away all traces of beauty, and the hard expression of her face repelled all idea of love.

"What do you mean?" he asked with alarm in his voice.

"Your father, unable to meet his liabilities, has gone off to America or elsewhere, and like a true man and a gentleman, has left us to face what he could not," she said bitterly.

Roger, trained in his mother's school, showed no emotion at this announcement; he only asked:

"Is it *all* gone? Yours and Ellen's too?"

"All," she replied. "Oh, read his letter, and you will see his excuses, 'a sure thing, absolutely certain to succeed, and then he would get it all back and more'—only it didn't. Excuses, yes, plenty of excuses."

Roger took the letter and reading it in silence, handed it back to his mother, who, for once, let her stern self-control be broken down.

"Words—words," she cried fiercely, striking the letter on her open palm with her clenched fist, "all words!"

"Mother," said Roger, touching her gently with his hand, "you have always been just, can you not now be merciful also? Do not be too hard in your judgment of him."

She shook off his hand, she had never been a woman who cared for caresses, and she said in a hard, level voice:

"There is a man in possession now, and everything will have to be sold up by next week."

Roger let a groan escape him as he cried: "Poor Ellen!"

Poor Ellen, indeed! His invalid sister, who, in constant pain, only seemed able to live when surrounded by every comfort that money could buy, how would she bear to be uprooted from the corner where she had spent her life and go to a strange place to live with straitened means?

His mother, he knew, felt the shame the most. Deprivations she could bear and make no complaint, but to be unable to pay all they owed in full, he knew would break her heart.

"Well," he said, after a pause. "What do you propose as the best thing to be done?"

"I have thought it out last night," she replied. "How much have you saved?"

"£500," he replied, with a pang, as he remembered how joyfully he had put by each pound for his approaching marriage.

"Well, I suppose, to save your mother and sister from going to the workhouse, you will give half what you had intended to spend on that foolish child, Daisy Mitcham's comfort, to save the necessary furniture from this wreck, to furnish some rooms for us to live in. Then, I suppose, Ellen must 'take in' plain needle-work, and I must give music-lessons or whatever I can get employment in, to pay for our daily bread."

Roger was too much shocked at this picture, to object to the words in which she clothed it, and indeed he had long grown accustomed to her constant gibes at his *fiancée* and his engagement, for he knew only too well by now that she considered the girl he had chosen to be beneath him, and that she had besides taken a personal dislike to her own since she had seen her shudder at a toad, and heard her confess to being afraid of cows.

The woman, who being always ignored and unconsidered by her husband, had revenged herself by exacting implicit obedience from her children; and that the son of whom she was in her heart so proud, should have set her will at defiance in this important matter, and turned himself resolutely from the bride she had chosen for him, would have caused her to dislike anyone he might choose, and of all the world of women there were no two more likely to misunderstand one another than the girl who was to be his bride and his mother. This had naturally caused an estrangement between mother and son, but knowing what she had to bear, Roger had outwardly shown little sign of what he felt, and had always been willing to come to her assistance as much as he could. Now he said with genuine dismay:

"Oh, mother, you can't, and Ellen can't. Why, some days she is too bad to move a finger."

His mother nodded grimly, with some slight softening of her hard features at the thought of her child's sufferings, but she only quoted: "Needs must when the devil drives."

"Where did you think of living?" he asked thoughtfully.

"I have thought of that too," she replied. "There will be no money to spare for invalid carriages and such luxuries, and it will be too painful and dangerous for Ellen to travel far—we must take some rooms in the village."

"Oh!" he burst out, and then, with a compassionate look at his mother, "However will you bear it?"

"As I have borne other troubles, without a fuss, I hope. I do not think my pride has been indulged much in my married life."

Roger, who knew that the same fall that had stretched his sister on a bed of pain for life, had also given his mother a serious internal disorder, could no longer restrain himself, and he burst forth:

"I cannot allow it. I will spend every penny I have to make you comfortable, and you must both come and live with me, and I will work for all."

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His mother's face almost kindled into a smile, and she half-put out her hand, and then drew it back, saying:

"Think what that will mean before you decide. You could not keep us and a wife as well; your marriage would have to be indefinitely postponed."

Roger sank into a chair, and buried his face in his hands.

"I will say nothing," she continued in a calm, dispassionate voice, "it is entirely for you to decide. A part of your savings to make a shelter for your sister and myself, is all I ask. For the rest, I believe that between us we could make enough to live on. So it must be only of your own free will that your marriage be put off," and she left the room.

Poor Roger! on the one hand his mother and his helpless sister, and on the other, his dear little sweetheart Daisy, and the marriage that was to have taken place in three months.

The next day Roger sat in his chambers endeavouring to forget his troubles in the intricacies of one of the all too few briefs that came his way, when a gentle knock announced a visitor. Looking up, a glad light came into his eyes at the sight of the charming vision before him.

Daisy Mitcham, small, plump, dark, and lovable, with a broad, white forehead, wavy brown hair, exquisitely marked eyebrows, and most distracting dimples, stood smiling before him. "Why, Daisy, I was just going to write to you," he exclaimed, taking her into his eager arms.

"Never mind now," she cried, freeing herself at last and instinctively putting up her hands to straighten her hat. "Here I am in the flesh, and, moreover, I have come to be comforted."

"What! Are you in trouble too?" he cried in dismay.

"Yes, I am, but if you look so terribly downcast, I shall go right away and say nothing at all."

Roger smiled at her tenderly, and she continued:

"I may as well say it right out at once and have done with it. I have been turned out of the Fitzwilliams' at a moment's notice."

"You have? And why?" he cried, with ready indignation.

"Well—oh—well—you mustn't be angry—but—well—George Fitzwilliam is home just now from Woolwich, and he—he—tried to kiss me."

"The dickens he did, the young beast!" cried Roger, striding about the room.

"Now," said she, going to him and putting her arms round him, "don't be so angry, I knew it was coming, and—and—I didn't tell him."

"Yes, but my darling, this is dreadful, why did you not tell me before? And so you gave notice and left at once?"

"No, no," she said, a little sad look coming into her eyes. "We who have to earn our living cannot afford to resent insults. Mrs. Fitzwilliam saw him, and she was very rude to me and told me to go at once—and so here I am." And she ended with a little sob and her head on his shoulder.

With a furious epithet hurled at the whole family of Fitzwilliams, Roger strove to comfort the girl with caresses and promises of protection.

At last a sudden thought came to him, and he said:

"Has this ever happened before, in any family you have been in?"

Hiding her head still more, she murmured: "Yes."

"When? And how often?" he asked, trying to speak calmly.

"Pretty often," she said, sobbing. "It's generally the elder brothers, but its worse when its the—the—the—fathers."

There was a silence, and Daisy, frightened, lifted up her head, only to read such trouble in the eyes she loved, that she dried her pretty brown eyes and turned consoler, but as the thought of her friendless condition came to her again she could not help saying—

"If only I had some relation I could go to till we are married—if only your mother did not so dislike and despise me, and if I were not so afraid of her."

Poor Roger, here was his difficulty increased tenfold.

Should he allow his mother and sister to go into a miserable drudging poverty, or should he send this fair girl out again to earn her living amongst strangers, and be exposed to insult on all sides?

L. Hughes.

Your Editor Chats.

Well, now you have our Christmas Number in your hands, and I trust that you are wholly satisfied with it. But I am in no trepidation as to that point, for I fancy that the most fastidious person must admit that the matter in this issue is splendid value for the money outlayed in buying it—twopence. For a few seconds glance through it, and see what is the result. There is a splendid new serial starting, hosts of good stories, plenty of pretty illustrations, two interesting competitions, another Unsolved Love Problem, a page of very funny jokes, and a further instalment of that engaging romance, "A Criminal Millionaire." Assuredly, I may say that it is an excellent twopennyworth!

A year ago, in fact, in last year's Christmas number, I started the Love Problems that were so successful. In this number appears the fifth of a new series of Problems which have been even more appreciated by my readers; and, following my custom, I am offering a prize of one guinea to the person who sends in what I consider to be the best solution of the difficulty in which Roger Forbes is placed.

The number of words in your replies must not exceed one hundred, and must be written on one side of the paper only.

The latest day on which I can receive solutions is Monday, the 28th of this month, but replies may come in any time before then. None arriving after then will be considered.

My decision as to the winner will be final. Envelopes should be addressed to "The Editor, *Short Stories*, Pearson's Buildings, Henrietta Street, London, W.C.," and must have "Xmas Love Problem" plainly marked in the top left-hand corner.

In connection with the Problem, "The Dilemma of Betty Carteret," I extend my heartiest congratulations to Mrs. Mabel M. Harvey, of 6 Harpers Lane, Guildford Road, Ash, Surrey, for her in every way excellent arguments bearing out her views that Betty Carteret should tell Geoffrey Hilton the state of her sister Kate's love. I have very much pleasure in awarding her the guinea that I offered for what was, in my opinion, the best solution.

I hope that you will all enter for the two competitions that are announced on pages 798 and 807.

The Statue Competition affords a splendid opportunity for testing your skill in artistic arrangement, and is of such a nature that it appeals to old and young alike.

I am sure that the Running Riddles Competition will also be one calculated to take your fancy. What more entertaining way to pass one of these long winter evenings could there be than puzzling out suitable answers to the conundrums given. I anticipate that my readers will show great ingenuity in this direction.

You will notice that I am offering as prizes, besides the money awards, cameras and complete camera outfits. These are very handy articles, and the best of results can be obtained from them. Do not miss these opportunities of becoming the fortunate possessor of one of them.

That you will all have a happy Christmas and a bright New Year is the last wish of

Your Editor.

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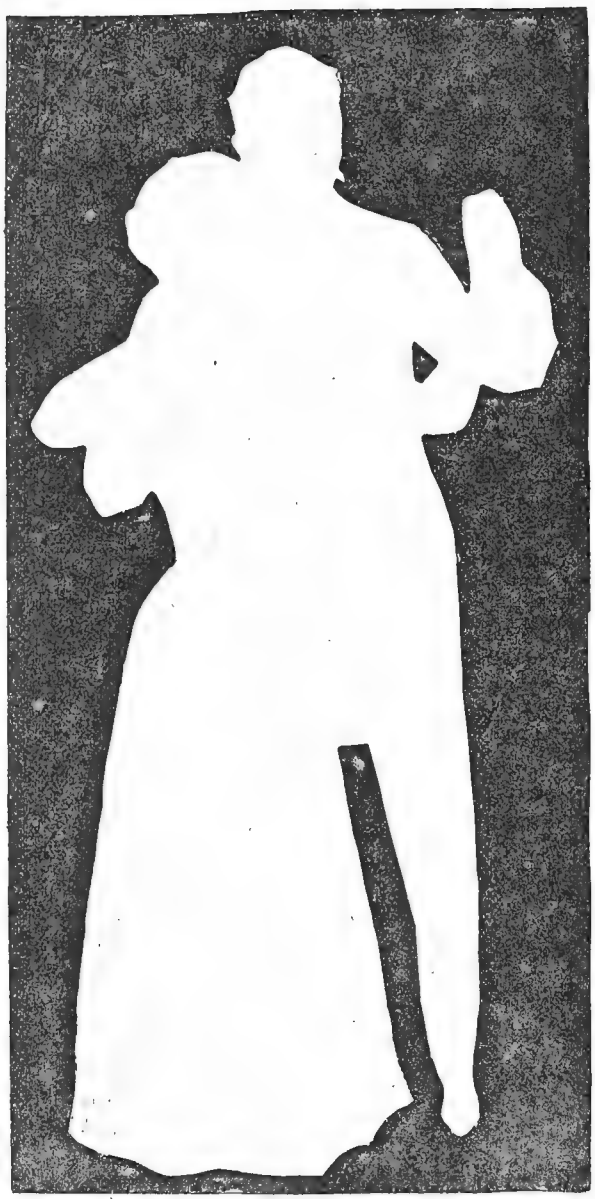
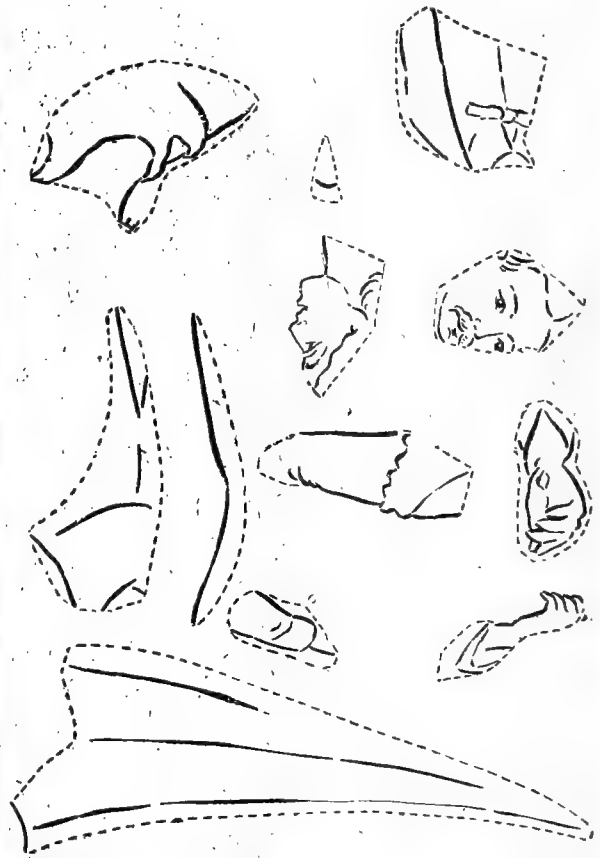
Statue Competition.

At the foot of this page will be found particulars of a very simple and entertaining competition. It will afford a very pleasant method of helping to pass away the time of a long winter evening, and readers should try to get all their friends to enter for it.

The prizes will be one of £2, and five splendid hand cameras, with complete photographic outfit.





WHAT TO DO.

Carefully cut out the twelve pieces above. Place them in the white silhouette so as to complete the picture.

To the readers who send in what the Editor considers to be the most correct and neatest pictures the prizes will be awarded.

The Editor's decision will be final, and competitor's entries will be taken as an acknowledgment of this condition. No correspondence will be entered into on the subject.

Readers may make as many attempts as they like.

All attempts must reach this office not later than Thursday, December 31st. None arriving after that date will be considered.

Address your envelopes: "Statue Competition," The Editor, *Short Stories*, Pearson's Buildings, Henrietta Street, London, W.C.

Name ... .

Address .....

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The Master of Swan Hall.

How a Gallant Gentleman Won His Christmas Bride.

"Who's that coming?"

"That little villain, Phil Dudley," said Pedro moodily. "Hang the fellow! Is he coming here? Can't he stay at home one day in the week, I'd like to know? He's got the old place, and can't he be content and stay there?"

The door dashed open, and his dark face—a spirited, olive-tinted face, which had gained him the nickname of Don Pedro—softened, the "winter of discontent" vanished, and he nodded a greeting to the charming little gentleman in the black frame of the old doorway—a slim youth, in a grey Norfolk suit; a slender aristocrat, with curled red lips, luminous grey eyes; a bold, delicate nose, and a close crop of waving hair, his head stately poised, and a wicked dimple in one rose-and-lily cheek.

"Hallo!" said Pedro, wiping his gun-stock lovingly with his handkerchief while he eyed his visitor.

"Hallo!" responded Mr. Dudley, airily. "Who's your chum, old man? Introduce a fellow, can't you?"

"You've heard of him, Phil," said Pedro, laughing. "It's Tom Burgoyne, lawyer and—ahem!—lover. Madge's fate, you know. Hallo! What's the matter with you? Where's your backbone gone?"

Phil gathered himself up from the door-post, and put out a slim hand to the brown-bearded, brown-eyed young man, with the pleasant smile, who rose from the edge of the table to greet him.

His face was white, and the hand the lawyer clasped icy and trembling.

"I have heard of you from Madge," he almost gasped. "I am delighted to see you, Mr. Burgoyne."

"Won't you stay and have a cigar, Phil?" asked Pedro.

"No; I—I—— Where's Madge, Pedro? I came over to see her."

"Well, you'll find her in the kitchen, preparing a sacrifice of baked meats in honour of Tom here," said Pedro kindly. "She'll be awfully glad to see you, I dare say."

"I dare say," said Mr. Dudley, with an attempt at airy nonchalance under the observant legal eyes smiling at him. "Madge generally is glad to see a fellow. Well, I'm off."

"How did you come over?"

"I came on my bike," said Mr. Dudley coolly. "The governor goes frantic when he sees me perched on it, so I tried how close to the edge of the cliffs I could keep it all the way from the Hall here. He could see me from his window, and I hope he liked it, that's all. Good-bye, gentlemen."

"It's 'Good-bye' to some purpose," said Pedro, as he vanished, leaving an odour of violets behind him. "He half lives here. Don't set up the Othello business, Tom, but he is up to his pink ears in love with Madge—poor little cub!"

Burgoyne laughed—a mellow laugh, with a ring of truth in its manly music.

"And Madge?"

"Madge is very fond of him," said Pedro, staring down his beloved gun-barrel, "and so am I. His governor is a polished old beast, a bloodless tyrant, with etiquette for a heart, and Phil's poor little neck is under his elegant foot. He's a small dare-devil is Phil, but I've seen him lie a long hour with his head rolled up in Madge's flounces and frills, crying like a baby, after some shindy with old Dudley. He's very reticent, though, about domestic affairs. I tell you, your sudden appearance has cut him up. Don't notice his ways, old fellow; he's only a boy—nineteen next Christmas."

"He may weep on Madge's muslins as long as he likes," said the lawyer, laughing. "I'm not given to jealousy. And so you don't like his father? Well, that's natural under the circumstances."

Pedro groaned, and then laughed.

"Yes, you see poor old Cousin Tom Dudley rather sold me. He had disowned his only child, Phil's governor, years ago for very excellent reasons, and he adopted and educated Madge and me as his co-heirs. That was lovely; but when he died a year ago, his will left all his great

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wealth to us, with this proviso—that if his son, Courtney Dudley, had a living son, that son was to be heir. Well, Courtney Dudley was advertised for and turned up nine months ago from somewhere in Spain, with a son, Phil, and Madge and I took thankful possession of our legal crumbs—this old cottage and twenty thousand pounds divided between us. Courtney Dudley reigns at Swan Hall until Phil's majority. Come, old chap, if we're to have a shot at anything, suppose we start?"

"Pedro bears his disappointment with lots of pluck," thought Burgoyne. "And so young Dudley is in love with my royal Madge—it looks rather that way, I must admit."

"His royal Madge" was dusting the dainty little drawing-room, assisted by Mr. Phil Dudley, who was very pale about the lips, and very large and dark and pathetic as to the grey eyes, and while Pedro went to call the dogs, Burgoyne stood looking at them curiously from the narrow hall.

"Royal Madge" was certainly a lovely girl, very like Pedro, dark, glowing, magnetic, with two kindly brown suns under her sweet broad brows, and a lithe, slim, soft, strong figure, pliable as a willow, and at present draped in soft, flowing, woollen drapery of a deep red.

"Phil," said the richest and most sympathetic of voices, "if you stand so close to my elbow, I'll end by smashing this vase and my heart with it. It's Tom's last present, you know."

Burgoyne's trained, observant eyes flashed, for, with an almost imperceptible gesture, the boy brushed against the lifted arm wielding the feather duster, and, with a crash, the gorgeous bit of china lay on the carpet in fifty fragments, and Burgoyne turned away without having been observed, his lips set, the thin upper one curled a little, lawyer-like.

* * * * *

The next day a groom brought an invitation to dinner from Swan Hall to the cottage.

These civilities were frequently exchanged, for Courtney Dudley found his brilliant, accomplished, young cousins very entertaining from many points of view, and for Phil's sake they were cordial to his father.

"Mr. Burgoyne, your friend, of whom I have heard so often," was included courteously in the informal invitation, and the crisp, golden September sunset, with its grand, patient moon waiting whitely to shine on her throne, and hints of stars in the sky, found them walking up the solemn avenue to the fine old stone house, with angels' heads on its spouts, oriel windows for the sunrise, bay windows for the sunset, mellow stained-glass windows for the cold north, and conservatory roofs glittering on the south—phalanxes of really ancient trees, like groups of kings in coronation robes of September glory, and what gave the place its name—a long, narrow artificial lake white with swans, lying close under the drawing-room windows.

"Prepare for a very dandified lord of Swan Hall," said Pedro to Burgoyne. "Phil looks splendid in evening dress. Ask Madge!"

"Phil is unlike other young men," said Madge, with a rather troubled look, "and if Tom watches him he will see what I mean. Poor Phil!"

"Rats in his garret, Tom," said Pedro concisely—"a decided crack in his noddle. I rather imagine that's the true inwardness of his governor not sending him to college."

"Hush, here he is!" said Madge hastily.

He bounded down the six stone steps in a flying leap, landing before Madge, a jewelled hand on each of her pretty shoulders, the last of the solemn sunset on his spirited, beautiful face, and Pedro winked at Tom with open amusement.

A figure stood before them as nearly as could be approached in a knickerbocker suit of pale-blue velvet, with collar and cuffs of white satin, brocaded with delicate pink roses. Lace adorned his bosom, and fell over his slim hands, diamond studs flashed from the lace, and his exceedingly elegant legs were dreams of beauty in pink silk stockings, while diamond buckles sparkled on his arched insteps. He was simply radiant, but a little penitential.

"Am I forgiven about the vase?" he asked, archly. "I did not venture down to-day in dread of a scolding. I say, Madge, kiss and be friends—won't you, dearest and loveliest? I'll be more careful of your china next time."

He darted a swift, piercing look at Burgoyne, who was staring in open astonishment at the picturesque young gentleman on whom Madge was bestowing a comfortable, sisterly kiss of pardon.

"Come in, boys," he said vivaciously, as he gave Madge his arm, "the governor is in the drawing-room. Madge will go and placate him—he's in a temper—and you fellows come to the billiard-room. The new table came to-day, Pedro, and I want you to see it. It's a beauty."

He whisked Madge's fleecy white wrap off in the hall, flung it to the footman, and led her—a lovely figure in shining, beautiful, pink silk—to the drawing-room door and pushed her in gently.

"Here's Madge, governor," he shouted. "Come out of the blues and entertain her. She's awfully stunning this evening."

He came back, whistling until the grand carved oak ceiling rang.

"He doesn't care for a woman unless she's a beauty or a wit," he said. "Now, I'm more catholic—I like them all, eh, Pedro?"

"I don't know, I'm sure," said Pedro, laughing. "Madge is the one woman I love at present. I suppose my time will come, however, monsieur."

"Stave it off," said Mr. Phil Dudley, with solemnity, "as I do. 'Merry and free is a bachelor's revelry' when a fellow can't get Madge, that is—— Beg pardon, Mr. Burgoyne. Don't look so serious; though you *are* my successful rival, you need fear no poisoned daggers or unwholesome *entrées* at Swan Hall, I assure you.

"Get out, you little scamp," said Pedro. "What a volley of folly! Don't mind him, Tom."

The moon was shining in at them through a solemn arched window as they crossed a corridor to the billiard-room.

A polished cuirass hung directly in its beams, and, mirror-like, caught Tom's eyes. He half-paused, and then swung square round in time to catch Mr. Phil Dudley, who was swaying like a slender tree, his face white as the moon outside.

He placed him on the cushioned window-sill.

"Get wine—water—anything! He has fainted," he said quickly, and Pedro rushed away like a whirlwind.

Phil's eyes opened. He sighed heavily, muttered something to himself in Spanish, and sprang to his feet with a sharp cry, changing to a laugh as he met Burgoyne's eyes. The lawyer stood looking at him in the moonlight with strange intentness.

"I'm subject to these attacks," said Phil, pluckily keeping on his feet. "A dickens of a bore, isn't it, for a fellow as fond of adventure by flood and field as I am? Come, let's go back to Madge; we can see the table afterwards, and christen it with champagne—the dad has got a brand fit for the gods. Where's Pedro? Ran for smelling-salts, I suppose. Hallo! Give me your arm, Burgoyne; I'm shaky yet."

The lawyer silently passed his arm round the lad, and Phil leant against the strong frame quietly for a moment, sighing heavily, evidently sick and faint almost to death. At Pedro's step, ringing along the corridor, he released himself and looked admiringly at Tom.

"I wish I had your stamina, old fellow," he said, sighing; "but any I had is vanishing into thin air. I'm not half the fellow I was six months ago. I'm getting done up. The dad's cantankerous, and there isn't a girl except Madge to flirt with in the neighbourhood. When I'm dead put 'Died of the blues' on my funereal urn. See here, you're not going to take Madge away directly, are you?"

"Next month—next week—if I can induce her to come then," said the lawyer, briefly and coldly.

Phil lifted his rival's sinewy hand, and pressed his lips on it.

"You and she will be very happy," he whispered, tremulously. "In the wide world there is not another like Madge."

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"Thank you," said the lawyer, not unkindly. "Shall we go to the drawing-room? Here's Pedro."

In the drawing-room Mr. Dudley welcomed them with admirable polish—a lean, elderly man, with a hooked chin and quiet eyes, like grey stones under drooping lids—whom Phil treated with an odd mixture of impertinence and terror.

The evening passed brilliantly, though more than once Madge wondered what made Burgoyne so very silent.

Phil was in wild spirits, and Pedro's brow was clouded as the three walked back to the cottage in the misty, midnight moonlight.

"I'm afraid Phil is ill in mind and body," he said sadly. "There's a screw loose about the boy. He's as cracked as rare old china. No one can fail to see it."

"I fail to see it," said the lawyer, rather curtly.

Burgoyne said no more; but early in the dawn he was still sitting in his vine-clad window, smoking and thinking.

At last he laid down his pipe and rose wearily.

"Two years to his majority," he said to himself, summing up the case finally. "There is not much lost by letting things alone until then. He may die in the interim, and Pedro and Madge get their own smoothly and without scandal; and if not—well, I shall know how to act when the time comes. Poor little Phil! poor little Phil!"

He gathered up a heap of documents which he had evidently been examining with great interest and care, replaced them in their envelopes and locked them into his bag, his face still dark and troubled.

"I wish I might confide in Madge," he thought. "But I can't—at least, until we are married. She shall decide the question then. My true woman! my royal Madge! Poor little Phil!"

"I sent for you and your sister," said Phil, "to say that I am *not* Dudley Courtney's son!"

"Oh, don't come medical jurisprudence over us!" said Pedro sourly. "I know him better than you do, and I say he's ill and cracked, by Jove!"

"His state seems to affect you profoundly, old boy," said Burgoyne, with a level look at Pedro's frank, handsome, dark face, bright in the moonlight.

"Pedro is as nervous about Phil as a hen with a solitary chicken," said Madge, with her soft, happy laugh; "and so am I. We love him dearly, Tom."

"Happy Phil!" said Burgoyne. "By-the-way, if he should die before his majority?"

"We are his heirs," said Pedro, "according to the will. I wish it were not so. To connect our gain with Phil's death seems unbearable. You don't know what a loving, generous, reckless, noble little scamp he is, Tom; but we—Madge and I—do."

But the question was decided before that.

* * * * *

"Apoplexy," was the verdict.

"A good riddance," thought Burgoyne, even as he and Pedro stood looking down at the hooked chin and mean, meagre head, still and heavy as a stone, on its satin pillow in the rosewood coffin.

Courtney Dudley had died alone in the night, even while Burgoyne had sat and smoked and read his documents in the moonlight; and now, after the funeral, Phil sent for them.

He had shut himself up since the death, refusing to see even Madge.

He had not appeared at the grave. He was ill, the servants reported, and Pedro and Madge were in despair, which, how-

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ever, lightened as they heard his light step crossing the stone floor of the hall to the library, where they and Burgoyne waited.

The door opened and the master of Swan Hall came in.

Pedro, nearest the door, strode to meet him. Burgoyne rose, and Madge sprang towards Phil, only to pause in amazement and utter dismay at the change in his appearance.

"Oh, Phil, Phil!" she said, in great compassion, and would have clasped his neck, but he recoiled sharply with a peculiar moan of intense agony, and dashing aside Pedro's strong brown hand, glided to the opposite side of the table, where he stood holding to a chair-back and trembling like a reed.

He was a mere ghastly shadow of the radiant little gentleman Burgoyne had first seen five days before. He was dressed in his usual dark grey Norfolk suit, with a crêpe badge on his arm; the dilated, luminous eyes were fixed and glaring, the oval cheeks hollow, the mouth set in fierce agony.

Burgoyne quietly took a chair so close to him that he could touch him without rising.

Madge again tried to approach him, but he waved her off. Pedro stood staring in blank amazement.

"Phil," he said, tremulously, "dear old fellow, what's this? Don't you know how Madge and I love you? And yet you repel us in this way, and, by Jove, I never thought you cared so much about your governor as all this."

Phil's hand went to his heart, and he dropped his stately golden head heavily on the back of the chair, then lifted it wildly, staring straight at Pedro.

"I sent for you and your sister," he gasped, "to say this to you—*I am not Dudley Courtney's son!* He had me in his power and forced me into the imposture. Phil Dudley died in Spain."

"Two years ago," added Burgoyne quietly, "in a village in the Spanish Pyrenees, and was buried there by the village priest, Father Antonio Baltro. I know all the details, Pedro. I have all my documents in this wallet. I stumbled against the truth in the tour of Spain from which I have just returned. You and Madge are the owners of Swan Hall. 'Phil,' as you call him, is——"

But with a cry, impossible to dscribe in its horror and intensity, the wretched lad fell at Burgoyne's feet, clasping his knees frantically.

"Oh, Heaven, not to Pedro and Madge! I have confessed all they need know. Oh, Mr. Burgoyne, I felt from the first that I must dread you. I am going away; they will never see me again. I have left a written confession with Pedro's lawyer—of all that is necessary. Let me go without telling them more."

Burgoyne turned his piercing eyes on Pedro, who, livid and breathless, was gazing at the figure writhing in anguish at the lawyer's feet.

"How shall it be, Pedro?" he asked. "It is for you to decide, and Madge."

He smiled. For Madge had already decided. White with horror and amazement, pity and love, she sprang forward and threw her soft, strong arms round the impostor's neck.

"Phil, Phil!" she cried. "I can't learn to unlove in a moment. Oh, my poor little Phil, I don't care what you may have been or done. I don't wish to hear. You shall be as dear as ever to me, indeed you shall, and to Pedro, and stay with us. Pedro, Pedro, tell him so."

Burgoyne drew back with a faint laugh. Pedro had taken Phil bodily from Madge, and was hugging the usurper of his rights cordially.

"You little scoundrel!" he said huskily. "So you were the tool of that courtly old ruffian, were you? And perhaps a pick-pocket beforehand? Well, never mind, old boy, you shall have a chance to be a credit to the name yet. Phil Dudley you are, and Phil Dudley you shall remain, that's fixed as fate. I'm like Madge. I can't learn to unlove, as she says, and now, Tom, when you've done grinning, put your legal brain to work, and help us out of the difficulty. I won't have Phil disgraced, not for twenty Swan Halls—by Jove, I won't! I don't care what he did to leave himself in Courtney Dudley's power. He's naturally an honest fellow and a true gentleman—as good a little rascal as ever breathed."

Pedro made a magnificent and knightly champion, his handsome dark eyes flashing, his chest well thrown out, and one large, long arm round the boyish culprit, but Phil burst from him and rushed to Burgoyne.

"Make them let me go," he whispered, "or I'll kill myself—I swear I will!"

Burgoyne put a heavy hand on the grey shoulder.

"And I swear," he whispered sternly, "to tell the truth on the spot, here to Pedro, in your presence, if you don't obey me. You will not be permitted to rush to ruin, Mr. Phil Dudley, allow me to assure you."

Phil's eyes flashed fire. The library window stood open, and tearing himself from Burgoyne's hand, he sprang on the sill.

Below glimmered the Swans' pool, and before either man could rush forward and prevent him, the light figure shot into the air and alighted magnificently on the opposite slope of green turf.

He reeled, recovered himself, and without one backward glance at the three white faces at the ivy-framed window, fled like the wind across lawn and slope, fled and vanished.

Late that night, as the train thundered into the station, Mr. Phil Dudley crept dejectedly out of the truck — a cattle-truck —in which he had stolen a trip to the city in the uncongenial society of a flock of sheep—and rubbing his dim eyes, looked up—into Burgoyne's face.

"You have had an agreeable trip, sir," said the lawyer grimly. "I trust you found your travelling companions entertaining. I *thought* I should find you on this train, Mr. Dudley."

Phil leant heavily against a hideous bale of rags awaiting shipment.

"Did—did you tell them—tell Pedro?" he gasped.

"No, sir, I did not. Come this way, if you please."

He led his captive to the telegraph-office and dispatched a curt message:

"*Have found Phil all right. Will write to-morrow.*"

"Now, sir," he remarked drily, "you will come home with me, if you are not afraid to trust yourself with your rival. I believe I have the honour of occupying that position towards you, Mr. Dudley. Much obliged for the honour you do Madge, I'm sure."

Phil hung his head, lifted it royally, and made a last spirited dash for liberty.

He wrenched himself from the kind, compelling hand, and fled into the very thick of the vehicles roaring down the gas-lit street.

Burgoyne plunged after him—a little fierce in the chase—and a policeman headed off the fugitive, who turned sideways, and the next moment was lying in the dust under the wheels of a passing vehicle.

He opened his eyes eagerly as Burgoyne bent over him, and smiled happily.

"It is all over," he whispered, gaily. "I'm smashed to atoms. Swear you'll never tell Pedro—swear, swear!"

"I swear I won't," said Burgoyne, hoarsely. "Poor little Phil!"

Phil smiled contentedly, settling into death.

"He said he loved me—give him my pearl ring—on my finger—and tell him I loved him. Good Heavens! so much!"

* * * * *

"As Phil declines to see me, I have nothing more to say," wrote Pedro, two months later. "I hope he will be more reasonable when I return from America. I am hurt and offended, by Jove! and can't see why I'm treated so scurvily in this affair.

"Tell him I won't mention his name again until he says he's ashamed of treating me in this style.

"I have made over half my share of the Swan Hall property to him. I don't know a little fellow worthier of good luck than Phil, and if he should remain crippled, he will need all the cash he can get to make life endurable.

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"You and Madge will do the best you can to make him happy, I know that; but I'm going away sad at the reflection that while Madge married you at two hours' notice in order to rush off and nurse his highness, I have been ignored, set aside, snubbed and sat upon. 'Don't come; Phil won't see you,' writes Madge in her last. Well, I won't, having a little spirit left; but tell my little Phil his place in my heart is as well aired as ever, and that his past is less than nothing to me, whatever it may have been. I am certain he was more sinned against than sinning. Be sure and tell him that!"

And so generous Pedro went his sunny way, to wander in the New World, and Phil's eyes grew greyer, larger, deeper, as they followed him in spirit from place to place.

* * * * *

"Hullo, Tim, Hullo!"

"'Tain't never! Well, this is good. So you're back, Pedro Dudley! Well, this *is* good."

"Yes, I'm back, Tim. I'm bound for Swan Hall to-night. Mr. and Mrs. Burgoyne are there; but they don't expect me till next week. How are all at Swanville?"

"All well," said Tim concisely; he was Pedro's foster-brother. "Want a ride on the engine, like old times, I s'pose. It's a nasty night, though, Pedro."

"Oh, it's all right. I've come back as tough as ever. So here we are, homeward bound."

"It'll be a terrible ride! We're overdue an hour, and the mail is tearing after us—best go as an ordinary passenger, Pedro. Well, if you won't, you won't; so jump on. I fancy she'll do sixty miles in the next hour. We've got a clear track ahead—Heaven be praised for it."

Pedro's quick blood boiled with excitement as the train thundered through the windy moonlight of the December night.

The engine fairly leapt along the track, and the noise was indescribable as its iron pulses beat, and its giant breast hurled itself against the wind.

Tim stood to his work silently, a little grim as he felt the monster bounding under him, but enjoying the danger he was able to control, and Pedro smoked and stared ahead through the glass of the "cab," and pictured Madge's joyous welcome, Tom's hearty handclasp, and Phil's shamefaced delight—poor little Phil, dear little Phil, who had felt his disgrace so keenly that he would not even write a line to him during the two long years of absence.

Pedro smiled at these pleasant visions of home, sweet home.

On one side rose fields white and ghastly in the moonlight; on the other, a wood, black and bare, the boughs clattering in the fierce gusts.

"Down grade!" roared Tim. "We're waltzin', that we are!"

The next moment they thundered round a curve.

The fierce shriek of the engine gave its alarm, and "Down brakes!" rang out, while the burnished giant fairly bounded, maddened by an attempt to control its headlong rush.

Ten seconds—a minute, two—of Titanic struggle between man and machinery, and the engine quivered into stillness, conquered, and lamenting its defeat with wild outcries from its brazen throat.

"So the darned old bridge is bust," said Tim, in an easy, conversational tone. "I say, Mr. Pedro, look ahead!"

Pedro *was* looking ahead, and so were the other six hundred passengers who had so nearly continued their journey by another route and to another destination.

There was a moment's dead silence in the crowd, which had flocked from the train, and then a vocal thunder beat the air into quick pulses, as cheer after cheer burst from six hundred throats.

The bridge had been swept out of existence, except one gaunt beam projecting from the opposite bank to about the middle of the stream.

On the extreme end of this timber, which shuddered as the water bellowed against it, stood a slight figure in mists of white drapery, which almost seemed a part of the flying foam nearly shrouding the airy form.

She held aloft a carriage-lamp, and its light smote actual flames from her neck and arms as it struck on the jewels binding them.

Her position was one of terrible danger; and on the bank behind was visible a brougham, its driver wringing his hands in terror as he strode up and down, watching her.

There was a sudden blank of silence. She had saved them! Would she perish in the teeth of that hungry torrent?

No. She retraced her steps in safety, and, just as her foot touched the earth, the beam parted, rose erect in the whirlpool, plunged and vanished.

She sprang into the brougham, and while renewed cheers followed her, the carriage dashed away, and the heroine who had saved six hundred disappeared.

* * * * *

"And now for Phil," said Pedro, an hour later, when he had related his adventures to Madge and Tom, and sung songs to the heroine of the bridge.

Madge looked at some distant satin and lace curtains over a bay-window.

"Phil is there—ran and hid when you came striding in so unexpectedly."

"Little donkey!" said Pedro, in high good humour.

"Phil, you rascal, come out; or must I pull you?" he said.

He put in a large, strong hand, groped for masculine broadcloth, and drew back with a very scared face, his fingers full of wet tulle, and in the wet tulle a slim, tall, crocus-haired young beauty, with a white, quivering face, and solemn violet eyes, who plucked herself from his limp grasp, and rushed into Madge's comfortable and beauteous arms.

"Tom," said Mrs. Burgoyne severely, "it is really enough for Phil to have lost her Christmas Eve party at the Blessington's, where she was going when she saw the disaster to the bridge, and to come home drenched to the skin without *your* heartless grins, Pedro. This is the heroine of the bridge, also Philla Dudley, twin-sister of the real Phil, who died three years ago in Spain. This is Philla, whom her father forced by threatening his life and his own to personate the dead boy.

"She put off telling you this, she was dreadfully ashamed of what was really no crime of hers, and made no promise to remain silent until you would come home. Phil Dudley is supposed to have died in London, and no one is mystified by our loving his twin-sister, who is supposed to have been at school in Spain, very, very dearly. Phil and Philla were never parted until he died, and all Phil knew, Philla, the little wild thing, was taught, from smoking mild cigarettes to playing billiards."

* * * * *

"But you *said* you loved me—Tom told me *that*," said Pedro, the very next evening, while Madge sang Christmas carols to her harp, and Tom discreetly turned over her music, ignoring the pair in the distant bay.

"That—that was when I was a—boy, and I thought I was killed and it couldn't matter," protested Philla; "and it was very unkind of Tom to tell you, when he knew I was going to live—very unkind."

But the silent eloquence of the tiny pearl ring in Pedro's brown palm, the peculiar, steady, ardent flame in his brown eyes as he looked at her in the moonlight, broke down her little bit of defence.

She shook her delicate, stately head shyly.

"Couldn't you wait, and ask me again next year, if you *really* continue to—to feel this way?" she asked tentatively. "I am afraid you may grow sorry—it's too sudden. Ask me next Christmas Day, Pedro."

This, of course, was surrender, and the next minute she was crying softly in his arms.

"Poor papa!" she said, "I hope he knows that his crime has not darkened my life. Pedro, it was not my fault, it was not. It nearly killed me, indeed it did."

"My precious Philla!" said Pedro, "I'm quite willing to hope, however faintly, that your admirable father is tolerably comfortably situated in the Elysian Fields, for, but for his rascality I never should have met my dear little Phil, nor won My Christmas Love!"

Isabella Crawford.

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That Would Cure Her.

"I suppose," remarked Miss Centimentle, "that since Mr. Bravely saved her life, she will think of him as her hero all the rest of her life?" "Oh, no," replied Mr. Practical, "she married him last week."

A Monotonous Pastime.

"Do you care for fairy stories, Angeline?" "No, Beatrice, no. I've been engaged six times."

Rather Unkind.

"What do you think of Charlie's proposing to me when he hasn't known me a week?" "I think that's the reason."

A Statement of Fact.

Mrs. Peckem: "I wonder if a man ever does get too old to marry." Peckem: "Of course not. Age doesn't always bring wisdom."

The Utterly Unutterable.

He: "I love you, darling, more than words can utter." She: "Utter them just the same, Harry. I like to hear as much as I can."

A Good Squeezer.

Mildred: "I believe Jack Scribley is a member of the Press Club." Millicent: "He must be, to judge by his actions with Mabel in the conservatory last evening."

She was not Giving Herself Away.

Nopurse: "I proposed to Miss Manymillions on Christmas Eve." Gotbills: "Shall I congratulate you?" Nopurse: "I don't know. She told me she wasn't Santa Claus; and that's all she said."

Very Nasty.

"I have such an indulgent husband," said little Mrs. Doll. "Yes, so George says," responded Mrs. Spiteful, quietly. "Sometimes he indulges too much, doesn't he?" They no longer speak to each other.

Can't Get at It.

Annie: "It's a dreadfully cold day, Claude, so you must put on your big coat. I suppose it is hanging where you put it last week?" Claude: "Yes, dear, it is all right and safe; but I have lost the ticket, so I can't get it."

He Was Disappointed.

She laid her cheek on the easy chair against his head, and murmured, "How I do love to rest my head against your head, Augustus!" "Do you?" said he. "Is it because you love me?" "No, because it is so nice and soft."

Did She Get Her Johnet?

Mrs. Phoxy: "I was helping Mrs. de Style to put her winter things away to-day. Oh, she has the loveliest seal johnet possible." Mr. Phoxy: "What? What do you mean by 'johnet,'?" Mrs. Phoxy: "Of course, how silly of me; but then, dear, I'm not familiar enough with one myself to call it a 'jacket.'"

The Little Games they Play.

Young Wife: "What are you going to give your husband for a Christmas present?" Old Matron: "A hundred cigars." Young Wife: "And may I ask what you paid for them?" Old Matron: "Oh, nothing! For the last few months I've taken one or two out of Henry's box every day. He hasn't noticed it, and he'll be so pleased with my little present and the fine quality of the cigars."

A Natural Question.

Mrs. Fowler: "How do you like my new hat?" Mr. Fowler: "What did it cost?"

Very Likely the Case.

She: "Did you say anything to papa about your being too young?" He: "Yes, but he said when I once began to pay your bills I should age rapidly enough."

Where the Rub Comes In.

Ethel: "I think I'd get married, too, if I could find a man I could live with." Carrie: "That isn't so hard, the trouble is to get a man you can't live without."

They're Awfully Good—Really!

Belle: "Would you allow a man to kiss you?" Maude: "Um—well, I think it is our duty to—er—make allowances for the weakness of mankind, you know."

The Way Women Have.

"I wonder why a woman never gives her husband the kind of Christmas present he wants?" "Because she doesn't try to! She gives him the present he ought to want."

And then She Kissed Him.

Wife: "Oh, John, I was shopping at Joblotz's to-day, and I saw the sweetest thing there." Husband: (diplomatically): "Yes, that's a great scheme of Joblotz's to have mirrors all over his shop."

It would be Costly.

Ethel: "I—er—suppose you know next week is Christmas—don't you, Charley?" Charley: "Why, of course I do! Why do you ask?" Ethel: "Why, you look so happy I thought you'd forgotten it!"

An Ambiguous Compliment.

Maud: "I wish I knew whether I ought to feel grateful to Mr. Gaboy or to be angry at him." Irene: "Why?" Maud: "He told me yesterday he didn't know which he most admired—my sparkling eye or my blooming cheek."

Mr. Jones was a Bit of a Flirt.

Blanche: "Did you make any conquests this summer?" Lilian: "Oh, yes, Mr. Jones proposed the day before we came away." Blanche: "Doesn't he pop the question in the most awkward manner imaginable?" They meet now as strangers.

Mistletoe not Necessary.

Doris: "Did you have a mistletoe bough in your house?" Phyllis: "No, I had one ready, but I forgot to put it up." Doris: "Of all things! Forgot it?" Phyllis: "Yes, you see Tom and I somehow or other became engaged the day before."

Would She Marry Him?

"I've thought of a capital *nom de plume*," said Henry, who sometimes writes for the newspapers. "What is it?" asked Henrietta. "'Will U. Marrimee.'" "Why, of course I will, you goose!" she answered. "Is that what you have been trying to say so long?"

How He Did It.

Old Gentleman (to a very rich old lady at a party): "Who is that handsome young man standing over there?" Old Lady: "That's my son-in-law. He's a very brilliant young man—made a large fortune by the law." Old Gentleman: "Indeed! How's that?" Old Lady: "The law made him my daughter's husband."

An Encouraging Sign.

"I'll tell you a great secret, but you must promise not to give it away." "Of course not." "I believe Miss Birdie M'Ginnis is gone on me. I've almost made up my mind to pop the question." "What did she say to you?" "She didn't say anything to me precisely, but on Tuesday she patted my dog on the head. Isn't that an encouraging sign?" "Yes, that's the next thing to patting you on the head. Your turn will come next."

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ROBINSON'S CHRISTMAS DINNER.

A Tale of a Wager.

"NONSENSE!" cried Jones. "If you made your face into a regular hedgerow of whiskers, I should recognise your voice at the first word you spoke It is only natural when I've known you so long."

"I don't think so," replied Robinson; "but, look here, to-day is the 21st. I'll come to eat my Christmas dinner in your dining-room on the 25th and you won't know me; I'll bet you a new hat you don't recognise me."

"Right! By the bye, we dine at 7.30 on Christmas Day."

"I don't promise to be there exactly at that time," said Robinson, "but somewhere between seven and ten o'clock."

* * * * *

Punctually at half-past seven, an assorted lot of Joneses—pa, ma, and six others—sat down to a good old English dinner of roast turkey and sausages, to be followed by wedges of plum pudding and mince pies *ad indigestib.* For five minutes pa Jones slashed and prodded the poor bird, thrust him in several places, and at last left him without "a wing to stand on or a leg to fly with," as the pathetic Irishman said.

Just as he was nearing the end of his task and his patience, there came a brisk rat-tat at the front door. A grim look appeared in the carver's eye as he absent-mindedly dropped a wing of the turkey into the potato dish.

"The Doctor and a gentlemen to see you, sir," said the cook—the housemaid, by the bye, was away on special leave.

"Ask 'em in here," said Jones cheerfully, and in they came accordingly. The Doctor was an intimate friend of the family. As for the other man, whom he introduced as his brother, just arrived from the Colonies, nobody required an introduction. Even the youngest Jones present—he wore a "pinny" over his clothes, so you can guess how young he was,—recognised him at once. Robinson was a clean-shaven man, as are most amateur actors, and the stranger's face was covered with whiskers, overdone, in fact. And then his gruff voice and shy manner—oh, it was too evident.

"I went to Liverpool this morning to meet my brother," said the Doctor, "and when we got home again an hour ago, I found the housekeeper had disappeared, leaving a note to say——"

"Bunkum!" murmured Jones.

The Doctor stared hard but thought his ears must have deceived him.

"To say she had been called away to London soon after my departure—her sister dangerously ill——"

"Awfully sorry," said Jones, trying in vain to chase a broad grin from his face.

"And knowing your kindness," continued the Doctor, "I have ventured to trespass on your hospitality for my brother and myself."

"You want some di-di-dinner?" gasped Jones, whose face was all red and purple like a fine sunset.

"That was my desire," said the Doctor wonderingly, and the next moment he received a tremendous dig in the ribs.

"It's no go," cried Jones with a wild explosion of laughter; "you really mustn't come with a tale like that."

"Sir!"

"I say, it's no go, Doctor. Fancy thinking you could take me in with such a barefaced invention."

"I beg your pardon, sir."

"Oh, *you're* all right, Doctor——"

"I wish I could say as much for you."

"You're heartily welcome. But I really cannot entertain your—ha! ha! your brother! Good evening, old man, don't wait," and then he suddenly sprang forward and gave a sharp wrench at the stranger's whiskers.

The next moment Jones was lying on his back in order to observe a wonderful constellation of stars that had suddenly appeared on the ceiling. His wife rushed to his assistance, and then with rare presence of mind fainted away at once. As for the little Joneses, they felt indeed that life had its glorious moments and began to clamber from their chairs preparatory to a general scrimmage. But the Doctor dragged his brother from the room and out of the house, and the little warriors trooped back into the dining-room.

"Was that Mr. Robinson, pa?" said one of the boys.

"Silence!" roared pa. "I will not have my friends discussed by you children."

"Will you carve some turkey for Jane, my dear," said his wife meekly.

The manner in which these quiet little women turn the current of a man's wrath is wonderful. Mr. Jones grabbed his carving utensils and made a frightful onslaught, seized the poor bird in several places at once and flung it violently head over heels, and then slashed and banged and battered it until the eyes of the children positively bulged with admiration.

"Now, then," he said at last, panting but happy, "if you will add the vegetables, my dear, Willie can take the plate to Jane. She is alone to-day, eh?"

"Yes, Sarah was sent for——"

"But she ain't alone, pa," murmured a twelve-year-old sentimentally; "she has her policeman there."

"*What!*" roared Jones.

"And he does love Jane, pa. He comes to supper reg'lar."

"And has she her—her usual policeman to-day?"

"No, pa. He had to go on duty in another district when he didn't expect, and he's sent a friend—another policeman."

"What sort of a man is the friend?"

"He's very tall and he's thin like Rob——"

"Eh?"

"Like Robinson Crusoe in my picture-book. And he's got lovely sideboard whiskers and a beard."

Pa Jones rose thoughtfully from his chair. "Our constables represent the laws of England," he said thoughtfully, "and I don't see why the laws of England should dine in the kitchen. I will take Jane's dinner to her and if the man is presentable, I'll ask him to join our own circle."

He hastily pencilled a few lines on a sheet of paper and, having folded it in triangular shape, propped it up on the mantelpiece.

Then he departed for the kitchen with the fire of ambition seething once more beneath his manly waistcoat. When he presently returned with the Laws of England, seven pairs of eyes threw themselves bodily upon the poor policeman, causing him to blush painfully.

"Will you serve our good friend with a little dinner, my dear," said Jones affably, leading him to a chair. "By the bye, Willie," he added, pointing to the triangular note, "if he doesn't come before ten o'clock, take this note to Mr. Robinson's house."

The policeman's helmet dropped from his nerveless hand. He stared sheepishly at his host, opened his mouth as though

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to speak, and then pulled himself stubbornly together and sat down to dinner.

"You haven't quite such a large family as this," said Jones genially.

"No, sir, I ain't married."

"What a remarkably hoarse voice you have, constable."

"Yessir, wants oiling."

"Boys, be quiet," shouted Jones, "I can scarcely hear myself speak."

"It's the pleeceman's helmet, pa."

"It'll take no harm, sir, don't mind."

"They're playing football with it, pa, under the table——"

"Noisy boys, but very smart at times," said Pa Jones presently. "In fact, that's my motto with boys. If they're not smart, make 'em smart—ha! ha!"

"P'raps the smartness is heredary, sir," said the policeman.

"Hereditary—h'm—did you ever throw a red herring across the road, constable?"

"No, sir, can't afford to play with wittles."

"Ha, ha, very good—by the bye, let me ask you a little riddle I heard the other day. Some mince pie? You know what a riddle is, of course?"

"Yessir, a sieve."

"No, no, I mean a conundrum."

"Oh, you mean whensadoornotadoor?"

"Exactly. Well, if a man robbed his father, what would you call him?"

"Shouldn't call him nothing, sir. The judge is paid to do that."

"But what surname would suit him best? Have a glass of wine? Allow me. What name would suit him best?"

"Dunno, sir."

"Well, I should recommend—*Robbin'son!*" Pa Jones literally bellowed the last word, thrusting his face suddenly towards that of the policeman, who drew back in alarm.

"You seem nervous, constable."

"Yessir, thought you wos a-going to bite me."

"But what do you think of the name I suggested?"

"Didn't hear it, sir"

"I suggested that a man who robbed his father should be called—*Robbin'son!*"

The policeman shrunk visibly when he heard the word, and then straightened himself with a homely dignity, in which, however, Pa Jones saw nothing but "red herrings."

"I dunno whether you've some game on, sir, 'cos you keep a-mentioning of Robinson at hevery moment, but, if you have, sir, I don't take it kind of you. O' course, you've a right to report me to the inspector for eating here when I'm supposed to be on duty outside."

"I'm not going to report you."

"Well, wodger keep a-mentioning of his name, sir?"

"Whose name?"

"Inspector Robinson!"

Pa Jones positively roared with laughter at this.

"Splendid!" he cried, "splendid! What a stock of red herrings you must have."

The poor policeman glowered at him in dull resentment. "Haven't got no 'errin's," he answered somewhat sulkily, "and don't want none while there's turkeys 'oppin' about."

The front door bell tinkled at this moment. They heard Jane, whose beauty, by the bye, was not of the Miss Miggs variety, amble massively along the hall and then open the street door.

"Can I see Mr. Jones, please?" said a very gruff voice.

"It's Robinson!" gasped the policeman in terror.

"Whose Robinson?"

"The Inspector! I'm done for now, sir."

Poor Pa Jones was torn by conflicting emotions. He couldn't make up his mind even yet whether the man who sat beside him was his friend in disguise. On the other hand, the man might be himself so to speak, and might have been bribed by the real Robinson to pretend to recognise the last-named as his Inspector. In that case the new arrival would not be himself, but somebody else, and—and—and—there was just a possibility after all that neither the policeman nor Inspector Robinson was Robinson—and——

"Well, who in thunder is he, anyhow?" yelled Jones, tearing his hair furiously.

"He's Robinson, sir."

Next moment the door was opened, and Jane ushered the new-comer into the room. At the noise made by the turning of the handle the policeman groaned feebly and then in a twinkling disappeared from sight beneath the table. The children forsook the helmet to stare open-mouthed at these developments.

"Good evening, sir."

"Good evening," said Jones absent-mindedly. "You're rather taller, I think, and not so good-looking."

"Beg pardon, sir."

"Oh, excuse me," said Jones dreamily, as he stared fixedly at the length of his visitor's legs and the breadth of his shoulders. If Jones' mind was full of red herrings, it is only fair to admit that the Inspector unconsciously found a counter-thought in the subject of straight-waistcoats.

They stared at one another with a strange intensity, whilst the poor policeman, lifting a corner of the tablecloth, stared at them both.

"Much taller and better built," murmured Jones thoughtfully.

"I've knowed all sorts and shapeses go that way," said the Inspector in a stage whisper.

"More whiskers," murmured Jones.

"But less patience," growled the Inspector, raising his voice a little.

"I've got so mixed up," said Jones pathetically.

"So I should imagine, sir."

"That I've almost forgotten what Robinson is like."

This was too much for the Inspector. He seized Pa Jones by the arm and shook him vigorously, in real or pretended indignation. "Wake up, sir, wake up," he cried. "*I'm* Robinson!'

"Yes, yes, I daresay you are," murmured poor Jones sadly. "They're all Robinsons to-night somehow."

"You've had one of my men to dinner with your cook," said the Inspector gruffly, "and you've taken him off his beat to provide him with the said dinner. It's agin the law to move the property of the Crown without permission——"

"Give him some turkey or he'll report me." These words floated in an agonised whisper from beneath the table. The Inspector stopped suddenly and began to mop his face with a young tablecloth. He had heard the whisper without distinguishing the words, and felt nervous.

"I've stood too near him," he murmured; "it must be catching."

"One of your men, do you say, Inspector? Had dinner here?"

"Yes, sir."

"H'm!—of course—er—is his name Robinson?"

"Give him some turkey," murmured the policeman again.

"Will you have some dinner?" said Jones miserably; "I don't know whether you're Robinson or not—and I don't care so much either. You're welcome to the victory——"

The Inspector, after accepting the invitation to dinner, listened to the rest of Pa Jones' speech in growing amazement. He was still more surprised when a long, blue-clad figure, whom he recognised at once as the very policeman he had mislaid, rose stealthily behind Pa Jones and presently threw an arm round the poor man's neck and then lifted him bodily from the ground.

The next moment poor pa was lying upon the hearthrug for the second time that evening, with a hard, bony knee to hold him down.

"Off his nut," said the policeman laconically. "He's been going wuss all the evening." Before any one could move to the rescue, there was a tap at the door and Jane entered with a telegram.

Mrs. Jones read it aloud to the assembled company:

"*Sorry cannot keep appointment to-night. Bet postponed.*—Robinson."

Wal Frank.

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RUNNING RIDDLES COMPETITION.

On this page you will find eight riddles; each riddle is described in the picture.

What you have to do is to find the answers to these riddles. Then write them on a piece of paper, using one side only, and send them in to me.

Address your envelopes The Competition Editor, SHORT STORIES, Pearson's Buildings, Henrietta Street, London, W.C., with "Running Riddles" plainly marked in the top, left-hand corner. All letters must reach this office by **Thursday, December 31st.** No attempts arriving after this date will be considered.

This page, signed in the allotted place, must accompany each list.

You can send in as many lists as you like, *but each list* must be accompanied by a separate page.

£2 will be awarded to the person who sends in what I consider to be the best list of answers to the riddles, and to each of the senders of what I consider to be the next best five attempts, I will award a splendid hand-camera, with complete photographic outfit. The Editor's decision will be final, and no correspondence can be entered into on the subject.

1 Why is this bird like this — PEN?
2. Why is this pen like this — GATE?
3. How does this gate resemble —
This SPOON?
RED CURRANT JAM
4. Why is this jar like this — SEA?
5. How does this sea resemble this — DONKEY?
6. Why is this donkey like this —
POSTAGE STAMP?
The Editor "Pearson" London
7. Why is this postage-stamp like — THIS LETTER-BOX?
8. How does this letter-box resemble — PEARSONS PUBLICATIONS?
DECEMBER PEAR
THE ROYAL
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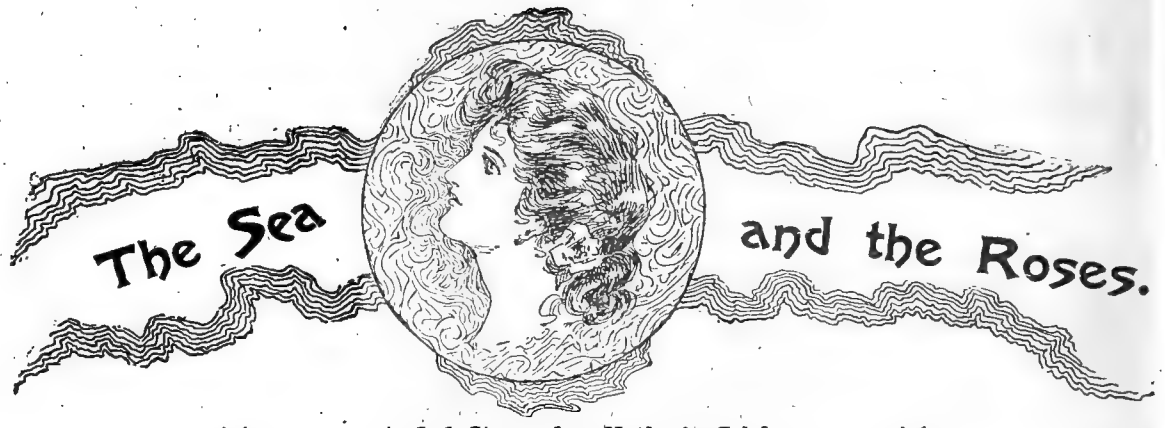

A Sad Story of a Mother's Grief.

GREAT masses of roses covered the wall and grew in rank profusion along the roadside, and, when I left the pony-cart and climbed the bank, I could see that the yard was filled with them and the little cottage facing the sea almost hidden with their wealth of colour.

Thinking that the owner would not object to my gathering a small bunch from such an abundance I was proceeding to do so, when, from behind a bush, a little old lady appeared, her refined face delicately pink from her exertions, looking as sweet as one of the roses among which she was working.

"Please don't pick them," she said, coming forward a few steps. "Don't think I'm selfish, but they're Dedie's, and I can't let anyone else have them," and with implicit faith in my obedience to her request, she returned to her work.

For a few minutes I stood and watched her deftly loosening the earth around the roots of a young rose-bush, and then, with the guilt of a child discovered in some wrong-doing, I laid the few roses I had plucked upon the wall, and going back to the cart drove to my friend's house, where I was visiting.

A few days later, while we were passing the garden with its rose-covered wall, the sweet old lady appeared from among the bushes, her arms full of cut roses, which she pressed against her breast.

To my friend's greeting she replied with a pleased light of recognition in her eyes.

"Who is she?" I asked, when we had passed out of hearing; and I told the episode of yesterday.

My friend did not answer for a few moments.

"Hers is a sad story. Years ago she came here, a bride, to spend her honeymoon in the little cottage, which belonged to her husband. They were wealthy, and the weeks slipped by until the autumn, when they returned to their city home; but she loved the place so that every summer they returned here to spend a few weeks in the country, within sight of the sea. And here, one July morning, when the roses she had trained over her windows were hanging heavy with dew, a little girl came to bless the household. The husband, going to the open window, plucked a great spray of roses, and, placing them on a stand by the bedside, said, 'This shall be her lucky flower.' And he kissed the baby and the young mother. They named the child Edith, but she always called herself 'Dedie.'

"When the lady appeared among us the second summer after, she was accompanied only by her baby; and instead of the beautiful gowns that had been her husband's delight, she wore a widow's dress, and her dear face was haggard with grief.

"The child had grown into a little lisping tot, who followed her mother about the house and garden, which was the widow's great solace, and where she spent most of her time, only going each day to the high cliff, from which she and her husband used to watch the sun set across the ocean, and the beach where they had walked in the moonlight, two married lovers.

"The flowers that had graced the baby's entry into the world seemed to have possessed some occult charm, for never was anyone more fond of roses than this child. She always carried a bouquet in her chubby hand, or wore a spray pinned on to her little pinafore, and if, by chance, she dropped one, she always stopped to pick it up.

"She was a strange child, too, with little unchildlike notions and fancies that oppressed one with a feeling of eeriness. The ocean fascinated her, and ofttimes at night, when it roared upon the rocky headland, she would awaken her mother and say, 'Mamma, why does the sea want me? Why does it keep calling to me?' Or she would sit for hours on the sand, laughing and talking to the little waves and ripples that ran up the beach.

"One evening her mother tied a little hood over the curls, and together they went down to the headland, as was their custom, the child carrying a big spray of flowers; a strong wind was blowing out to sea, and the mother shielded the child in front of her. They had stood thus for some minutes, when the roses slipped from the child's hands, and the wind caught and blew them towards the edge of the cliff. She darted forward to save them, and was stooping at the very edge to pick them up, when there came a sudden blast, she tottered on the brink for a moment, and then, grasping the spray of roses in her little hands, pitched forward into the sea.

"Her mother never returned to her city home. Winter and summer she has roses blooming in the cottage or garden, and every evening she goes to the cliff with an offering of flowers for 'Dedie's grave,' as she calls the ocean."

As we returned home that evening, my friend pointed out towards the sea. On a high point overlooking the water a lone figure was outlined against the setting sun. As we looked, she raised her arms and threw a great cluster of roses out into the water, and then sank upon her knees and with clasped hands watched them float out into the pathway of the sun.

So large a grave; so small a child.

George Barnes.

Are You Generous? Are You Clever?
Are You Mean? Are You Dull?

Whatever you are it is as well to know other things concerning yourself, so send a specimen of your handwriting, together with six penny stamps and a stamped addressed envelope to RANEE, 23 Pearson's Buildings, Henrietta Street, London, W.C. A reliable delineation of your character will reach you in return—this will give you the required information.

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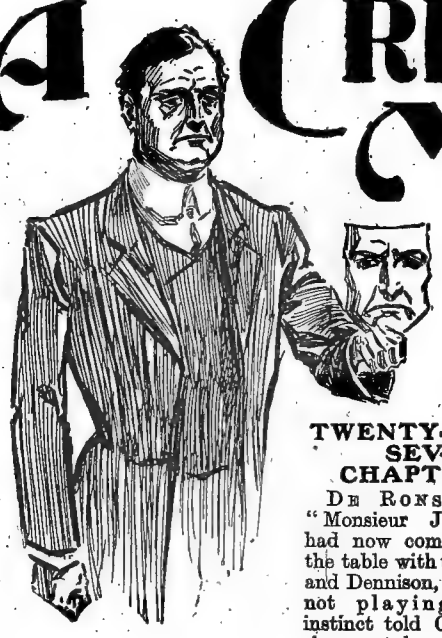
POWERFUL ROMANCE.

A CRIMINAL MILLIONAIRE



By GEORGE GRIFFITH.

Author of "The Angel of the Revolution," "Olga Romanoff," "The Lake of Gold," etc., etc.

TWENTY-SEVENTH CHAPTER.

De Ronski and "Monsieur Justin" had now come up to the table with the ladies and Dennison, who was not playing. Her instinct told Cora that she must have almost run her luck out. She was perfectly cool, and during the whole game no one had seen the flutter of an eyelid. It would have been difficult to know whether her father or her lover, each in his own way, admired her splendid nerve the more.

She began to experiment. A louis on red-black-red. Lost. Another on black-red-black. Also lost.

"That will do, Duke," she said, pushing the heap of notes and gold towards him. "I don't know how much I've won for you, but I can't play any more. The fire's gone out. You should never play when you find that sort of feeling coming across you."

"Ah, what a player you are!" he said with a look of frank adoration. "With your *sang froid* and daring you would go far with the bank, and you have learnt the best of all lessons—when to stop. I owe you a thousand thanks, Miss Cora."

He put the gold into his hip-pocket and rolled up the thick sheaf of notes. As they rose Kesteven leant over Darfield's shoulder and said in a low, angry tone:

"I reckon if I were you, I'd quit too. Just come out here. I want a word with you."

Darfield got up, his face pale and his eyes still burning with the frenzy of play. He was not affected by the loss of the money. He could replace that for the asking. It was only the fact of losing, of being beaten in a fight with Fortune, and watching a young girl apparently sway the fickle balance as she liked with every turn of her hand.

He followed Kesteven into the Gardens, whither, after they had received the congratulations of the others, Cora and the Grand Duke followed very shortly. Meanwhile, M. Justin excused himself and went away towards the offices of the Administration.

When the party assembled for supper at Ciro's, Mercedes looked hard at Cora for a moment and smiled. There was no mistaking the answering smile, and so she went beside her and murmured very softly:

"May I congratulate your Highness?"

She nodded and raised the back of her left hand for an instant. One of her rings, set with a single pearl, was gone, and in its place flashed and glowed a half-circlet of diamonds and rubies. Mercedes' right hand closed over it, and a gentle pressure told how happy she was in her friend's happiness.

When they got back to Nice they separated at the station.

Kesteven, the Grand Duke, and Darfield went with the two girls and Janet on board the yacht, where, late as it was, his Highness had a brief but entirely satisfactory conversation with Kesteven, and then, after a yet briefer but still more satisfactory interview with Cora, almost on the same spot on which Mercedes had given herself to her vanished lover, he went ashore to the Cercle, and finished the night at baccarat.

As he told her the next day, there must have been some magic in the money she had won for him, for, plunge as he would, it did not seem possible for him to lose, and when he strolled back to his house, puffing contentedly at a big cigar and glorying in the splendour of the sunrise, he left behind him a score or so of exasperated, and, in some cases, despairing, gamblers the poorer by nearly half a million francs.

Dennison and Justin accompanied the de Ronskis to Cimiez, for the night's work was not quite over for them yet.

The ladies retired as soon as they reached the hotel, and then the three men sat down to business.

"I think," said Mr. Smith, speaking in de Ronski's French for the benefit of his colleague, as he lit a cigar, "that the chain of evidence is now fairly complete. This Mr. Darfield, otherwise Culworth, will be invaluable, provided only that his wife is correct as to his courage and good faith."

"I think we can feel pretty safe as to that if she is prepared to answer for him," said Dennison, "she has enough strength of character herself for a couple of men."

"If my experience of men and women has taught me anything I am fully agreed with you," assented M. Justin. "And now, my friend," he continued, "now that we have got so far, perhaps a little revision would not be out of place. I should be glad to hear you recapitulate the points on which we have to rely."

"That would be useful," said Dennison, "we can't understand each other too completely."

"Very well, then," said Mr. Smith, getting up and standing with his back to the door. "To begin with, we have the fact that Mr. Wilfrid Ellerton did not fall overboard from the *Isola*. He simply disappeared somewhere into the interior of the yacht, and there we lose sight of him.

"Even Billaud cannot tell us whether he is alive or dead, and it remains to be seen whether Mr. Darfield, as we may call him for the present, can and will throw any more light on the subject. This much, however, is perfectly plain. He cannot have disappeared save by Staunton's orders, and Staunton would not have got rid of him without some very strong reason indeed.

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"In that reason, probably, lies the clue to the whole mystery.

"As we know Staunton to be a criminal not only of the most desperate type, but also of amazing resource and ability, and, moreover, with the most enormous interests at stake, it is necessary for us to face the conclusion, that, if he had reason to believe young Ellerton's existence dangerous to his own safety and that of his schemes, he would not hesitate for a moment to take his life.

"On the other hand, he may only have safely disposed of him until he has realised this dream of a South American Republic, and raised himself above the reach of the law.

"Now, I think you gentlemen will agree with me that this mysterious trip made by the yacht to the shores of Iceland, when she was ostensibly travelling from Leith to the Riviera, lends some colour to the latter supposition. He would hardly have sent the boat so very far out of her way merely to drop him overboard. He could have done that anywhere."

"To my mind," said Dennison, "that is the strangest part of the whole mysterious business. What did the yacht go there for? It can hardly have been to maroon poor Ellerton on one of those little islands up there. Staunton wouldn't have been such a fool as to run the risk of his being picked up by the first fishing boat that happened to pass. And yet she simply cannot have gone there for nothing. The thing's incredible."

"On the other hand," interposed Monsieur Justin, "since we have now assured ourselves that those counterfeit notes, of which Mr. Darfield passed no fewer than fifteen at the Casino to-night, have been imported by the yacht, may not this strange and secret visit to Iceland have some connection with the hidden manufactory of notes and coin for which the police of the world have been hunting in vain for the last five years?"

"It is possible," said Mr. Smith, "though scarcely probable. In that case we should have to look for Mr. Staunton's private mint somewhere among the volcanic caverns of Hekla. For my part I should be more inclined to seek them in some lonely gorge of the Andes. There are too many people in Iceland, and, besides, there are tourists.

"But to continue. Three days ago Staunton entertained a party of gentlemen at lunch on board the *Isola*. They were supposed to be his financial associates in those great operations in which we know he is the controlling power. So they are, but we know that they are something more. We know their histories, and everyone of them is intimately connected with South American politics. In other words, they are Staunton's political agents, and doubtless also channels through which his manufactured coin and notes get into circulation.

"Staunton went to Mentone this morning. One of our agents went with him. Three of these gentlemen met him there, and with them was a Signor Riccola, whose other name is Andrea Guardino, the head-centre of the Mafia in Southern Italy. What has Mr. Isolo Staunton, the millionaire financier, the friend and helper of statesmen and princes, to do with the Mafia?"

"That," said Dennison drily, "somehow seems to take one's mind back to the London murders. I hope our friend doesn't consider any of our party here inconvenient or superfluous. But surely he can hardly suspect anything queer about us."

"No one can tell with a man like that," said M. Justin gravely. "We have our spies, but depend upon it he has his watching them, and if he does suspect—well, after what our friend has told us, the atmosphere of Nice may soon get rather unhealthy. I should not wonder if there happened a murder or two in the Casino Gardens before long if that is the case.

"But, my dear de Ronski," he went on, suddenly changing his tone, "is not the chief question now what is to be done? Now that we know as much as we do and that we are sure of three good witnesses, I for my part am for immediate action. The French law will permit us to arrest him the moment he sets foot in Nice. Meanwhile, if we secure Billaud and Darfield and put them in safety, they will make statements on oath which will justify us in putting an embargo on the yacht, after which we can search her—and then who knows what we may find? What do you say?"

"I'm afraid I can't agree with you," replied Mr. Smith after a moment's thought. "In the first place, it is too much to do on the evidence we have got. You cannot arrest a man like Staunton as you would an ordinary swindler or thief. He is too big a fish for that net, and if he broke it away goes all our work and a good deal of reputation with it. In the second place some of us would probably die suddenly before the trial, if we got him as far as that, and that would be a waste of useful life.

"Thirdly, you will pardon me if I say that it would be the worst policy to lay Staunton by the heels until we have tracked him or some of his associates to this mysterious money-manufactory of his. If we did someone else would carry on the business just the same, only with greater precautions.

"Fourthly, such a course would destroy all hope of clearing up the fate of Wilfrid Ellerton, which something seems to tell me will somehow prove to be the key to the whole puzzle.

"Fifthly, we must not spoil the prospects of the concert. No, I am quite serious. As I will explain to you later, I hope for other than social and artistic results from that same function. Let us at least wait until that is over till we come to any decision."

"Oh, as to that, most certainly," assented the other, "there can be no harm in waiting that short time, and, besides, now that you have given your reasons, I am inclined to agree with you that caution is the best policy."

"And I am distinctly of the same opinion," added Dennison. "At any rate, for all the ladies' sakes, don't let us spoil the concert. Some of them will have trouble after that, and to spare."

It so chanced that just as this decision was come to, Staunton was saying to Don Ramiero, after a nearly all-night discussion in his room at the Hotel Colline St. Michel at Mentone:

"Very well. It is a desperate step to take, but if it really proves necessary, after the concert will be the time."

There was another man in the room with them. He was the servant who had ushered de Ronski and Dennison into the presence of "Monsieur Justin."

TWENTY-EIGHTH CHAPTER.
On the Yacht Again.

It is scarcely necessary to say that Lady Medcalf-Mears threw herself with all her zeal and energy into the congenial task of helping Mercedes to make the concert on board the *Isola* the great social event of the season. The original idea had expanded somewhat with consideration, and as it was unlikely that the yacht could get back to her anchorage before morning, it was decided to "make a night of it."

Hence all the guests were to be requested to bring a change of clothing with them, as they would sleep and breakfast on board, and return to Nice in time for lunch.

When the de Ronskis had definitely accepted the invitation, her Ladyship knew that the success of the function was absolutely assured. At least a hundred of the best people in the place were on her visiting list, and on the morning after Cora's triumph at the tables the three were assembled in her drawing-room engaged in the very pleasant occupation of selecting from these the most brilliant company possible—they had fixed the number of invited guests to fifty—when Mercedes received the following telegram from Mentone:

"*Keep concert party as far as possible to our own immediate circle. Not more than twenty guests, of whom I shall bring three. Spare no expense to do the thing well.*—Staunton."

"Well," exclaimed Mercedes, as she passed the telegram to Lady Medcalf-Mears, "I wonder what on earth papa means by that. We have plenty of room for fifty. What a mercy we had not sent the invitations out. What a lot of enemies we should have made."

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Yes, indeed it is," replied her ladyship with an undisguised look of disappointment on her handsome, aristocratic features. "Really, my dear, this papa of yours is rather annoying. He does not seem to see that when everyone who is anyone would almost go on their knees for a card, we shall make enemies for life of every man and woman—especially the women—whom we have to leave out, and here he vetoes thirty at one fell swoop. Really it is most difficult."

"I guess Mr. Staunton won't take much stock of that, though," laughed Cora somewhat unfeelingly, for there had already been a rumour that a favoured fifty were to be invited, and the fury of the disappointed ones had its comic side for her.

"It is, of course, a great pity from that point of view, and I quite see what you mean, Lady Medcalf-Mears," said Mercedes with a little chill in her tone. "At the same time I am quite sure that papa would not have told me to do this unless he had some very good reason for it. At any rate, no one can charge him with any lack of hospitality, so it can't be that."

"Oh, of course not, my dear!" exclaimed Lady Medcalf-Mears, who saw at once that she had expressed herself a little too freely, "no one would dream of that. He is the most hospitable and generous man in the world. You must forgive my little outburst. I didn't mean anything.

"But you know all my life I have studied entertaining as an art, and I have never had quite such an opportunity as this. A party of fifty on board that lovely great yacht of yours would have been just perfect. And I could have got *such* nice people, too. It is just the time."

"Yes, dear Lady Medcalf-Mears," said Mercedes with one of her sweetest smiles, "believe me, I can quite understand your feelings, and if papa cannot give me a very good excuse you can depend upon it that he shall have a thoroughly good scolding. And now let us decide who are to be the favoured twenty—or rather seventeen."

When Mercedes met her father at the station on the morning of the eventful Tuesday, he simply said in reply to her half-reproachful question:

"My dearest, I am sorry if I have disappointed you and the others, especially her Ladyship, as she has been so kind; but, well, in the first place, you know how I hate big parties, particularly on board the yacht, and I never really intended this to be anything more than a little treat to our immediate friends.

"It struck me afterwards that Lady Medcalf-Mears might think she had *carte blanche* and crowd the ship up as she does her own drawing-room. With ourselves there will be about twenty-five, and that, you must admit, is quite enough, especially if we are to have a little dance on deck afterwards."

Accustomed as she was to obey and trust him in everything, Mercedes at once acquiesced.

"Of course you are perfectly right, father, as you always are," she said, putting her arm through his as they left the station. "Twenty-five will make a perfect party, and we shall know them all well. I have made friends with the de Ronskis, and they are simply delightful—and Paula, she is so lovely that Cora and I are almost ashamed to look in our glasses. Oh, and Cora is engaged to the Grand Duke, and so, of course, he is to be one of the party. She won him nearly a hundred thousand francs at the Casino the other night, and he proposed 'right away,' as Cora would say. They will make a splendid couple, won't they?"

"Splendid," echoed her father somewhat absent-mindedly, for he was thinking many thoughts of far greater import to the world than even the marriage of a Grand Duke, "and from what you tell me he has shown sound financial judgment, as well as excellent taste."

Mercedes went with him on board the yacht to lunch so that she might have a final interview with Dinaud, the head steward, and to satisfy herself that everything was in order for the evening. Staunton went at once to the sanctum, where he found Don Ramiero, who had come on from the station direct, translating some code telegrams.

The Open Door.

A doctor recently received a written request for his professional services, worded thus: "My wife's mother is at death's door. Please come at once, and see if you can pull her through."

Now there are two sides to every door, as there are to every question, and it will be observed that the man with the sick mother-in-law neglected to state to which side of the door he wished the doctor to pull his suffering relative. But we will be charitable, and suppose that he desired to save the patient, though he expressed himself so awkwardly.

When Mrs. Cooper, of 17, York Road, The Hyde, Hendon, was ill about five years ago there was no question as to the anxiety of her friends to save her. Her second child was only a few weeks old, and her life was very essential to her husband and family. It was just then that she became subject to fainting fits, and betrayed great nervousness. The root of the trouble was indigestion—the complaint which only Mother Seigel's Syrup will cure.

"I was sometimes bent double with pain," said Mrs. Cooper on 24th March, 1903, "and was afraid to eat, knowing what the consequence would be. Besides, I had no appetite. Violent headaches, with floating specks before my eyes, assisted to make my life unendurable. Numbness of the hands and feet, and palpitation of the heart, were other bad signs. A doctor who attended me said mine was a case of severe indigestion and nervous debility. He appeared to understand my case, and sent me a great deal of medicine; but the only result of his attention was—*bills*. Instead of improving, I grew worse. At night I could get no proper sleep, being disturbed by dreams and in constant dread, as of some impending evil.

"It was last Christmas, when I was very ill, that my mother suggested that Seigel's Syrup might benefit me, having proved it to be a splendid thing in other cases. I accordingly tried it, and was greatly astonished at the result. Before I had quite taken one bottle, I felt better. The pain left me, and I improved rapidly. It gave me refreshing sleep, followed by an appetite for breakfast. Soon the headaches and dizziness ceased to trouble me, while my strength increased daily. It is four months since I began to take Mother Seigel's Curative Syrup, and now (thanks to it) I am as well as ever I was in my life."

Of late there has been much contention about the policy of the "open door;" but there can never be contention as to the value of what cured Mrs. Cooper. That was proved 35 years ago, and has been proved every day since.

A Novelist on Marriage.

Thackeray says: "To marry without a competence is dangerous, no doubt; but do not thousands of our fellow-beings commit the crime every year with no other trust but in Heaven, health, and their labour?" Alas, yes! and when (as often happens) the second of these three trusts fails, the third must fail also, and there is a social wreck. Mother Seigel's Syrup is a true friend to the poor and suffering.

Indigestion prevents a man or woman working properly. Its victims easily tire and are always drowsy. Business men cannot afford to employ them. Seigel's Syrup cures indigestion. It removes that load of oppression at the chest after eating, dispels headache, creates appetite, and brightens up the dull sufferer as nothing else will. Mrs. Mary Rogers, Fay Gate, Horsham, Sussex, writing on May 2nd, 1903, says: "I have pleasure in telling you of the benefit I derived from your Seigel's Syrup, when I was suffering from indigestion. My illness began with loss of appetite, and a general low and depressed feeling. I could not eat, and my strength failed rapidly.

"I suffered much from headaches, dizziness, and nervousness, and though I consulted doctors and took quantities of medicine, I got no better until, on the recommendation of a friend, I tried Mother Seigel's Syrup. After taking a few doses I felt myself getting better. My appetite returned, I was again able to sleep soundly, and soon lost the drowsiness, headaches, and dizziness, and was as well as ever. I think Seigel's Syrup is splendid, and shall always recommend it."

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"Ah," he said, taking one of them up from the table, "then they have replied. All of them?"

"Yes, all," was the reply, "and all say 'yes.' In a month, Señor, the new flag will go up, and we shall have the happiness of saluting you as first President of the United States of South America."

"I hope so, my friend and faithful ally," replied Staunton, flushing slightly, and speaking with a slight tremor of emotion which was not often heard in his voice. "But there is a good deal to be done, and many things may happen in that month. For my part I hold it as little less than a misfortune that our hands should be forced in this ridiculous way just when everything was going on in such perfect order. But some of them shall pay pretty dearly for their treason and their regrettable meddling with affairs which are infinitely above their conceptions."

"It will only be justice," said Don Ramiero, rubbing his hands gently together. "As you say, they have no idea of the great work with which they are interfering. But those who meddle with the machinery of Empire must not be surprised if they get crushed in the wheels. It is too soon to ask you, Señor, how you propose to dispose of—the more inconvenient? Will they become citizens of your other kingdom?"

"It would serve them right to make slaves of the lot," replied the Lord of the Underworld savagely. "As for Billaud, the lake would not be too bad for him, and I should like to make the others watch his last dive. That sham fiddler fellow, too, our old friend Mr. Smith. What an utter fool the idiots must take me for—I, who have the most perfect detective in the world, to be taken in by a childish device like that. Heavens! They shall learn something!"

"I shall be rather sorry for de Ronski, *alias* Smith," said Don Ramiero reflectively. "He has great genius, and it is a thousand pities that he ruined it by becoming also a policeman. His wife, too, is most charming—and his daughter; was there ever such a perfect union of genius and loveliness?"

"My dear Ramiero, you are getting quite romantic in your old age," said Staunton with a laugh that he would not have liked Mercedes to hear. "I'll tell you what," he went on, taking out a cigar and lighting it, "if it does become necessary to translate these good people to the Underworld, and to abolish friend Smith-de-Ronski, you shall have the reversion of the widow. As for the divine Paula, she will make a delightful diversion from those pale, soulless houris of my little paradise down yonder. How some of them will stare when they open their eyes for the first time after their drug-sleep—as I expect poor Ellerton did. I wonder how he is getting on. Well, I shall be able to pay him a visit, I suppose, before long."

"Ah, I like to see you in those rare moods," laughed Don Ramiero softly, as he rolled a little brown cigarette. "You are a great man, Señor, when you are conquering men by the might of that golden sceptre of yours, but you are most interesting when you let a little of the primeval savage be seen."

"Well, though it is necessary to keep him chained up pretty tightly, the best of us would be poor creatures without him," said Staunton, stretching out his powerful arms and clenching his fists. "But now, my friend," he continued in a changed voice, "let us leave these pleasant themes until we are able to turn them into still more pleasant practice, and get to business. We have a good deal to do before our guests arrive. I think you will find the Señores in the smoking-room. Oblige me by going and telling them that I am ready for them."

Don Ramiero opened the doors and presently returned with the delegates from Chili, Brazil, and the Argentine.

"Now, Señores," said Staunton, when Don Ramiero had closed the doors, "I think you will agree with me that, since we have been compelled to advance our plans so suddenly, there is much to be done and no time to lose, since everything must be in order before we start to-night. Do me the favour of making yourselves comfortable, and then we will get to work."

TWENTY-NINTH CHAPTER.
The Dinner Party.

"Good heavens, how perfectly lovely!" exclaimed Lady Medcalf-Mears as she reached the gangway platform of the *Isola* a few minutes after seven, the hour for which the guests had been invited. "You naughty girl," she continued, as she shook hands with Mercedes, who, robed and adorned in the very perfection of costly simplicity, was receiving her guests, "then this is why you wouldn't let me come and help you with the final arrangements? Well, if you wanted to give me a surprise, you have done it. I never saw anything so exquisite in my life. You might have had the fairies working for you."

Her ladyship's praises were certainly well merited. The whole stretch of the broad promenade deck from the navigating bridge to the stern had been transformed into such a garden as Eastern romancers never dreamt of. The side rails had disappeared, buried behind sloping banks of the most exquisite flowers that the gardens and hot-houses of Southern France could produce. The Council Chamber, the glass-domed entrance to the saloon, and the smoking-room had vanished also, transformed into mountains of blossom and greenery. An avenue of alternate palms and tree ferns ran down the middle of the main deck. The bridge had become a fairy bower glorious with blooms of every conceivable hue.

Against the after end of the smoking-room and facing a broad stretch of deck, fenced by a semi-circle of palms, was an embowered platform covered like the deck with pale green cloth. At one end of it stood a cream and gold Bechstein grand, and in front a silver, harp-shaped music stand, mute witnesses of pleasures to come.

No more perfect night could have been given even if the weather had been arranged to order. As the sun sank towards the Western horizon behind a veil of mingled amethyst, amber and gold, the full moon rising in the east changed from white to silver, and from silver to pale, burnished gold.

"Ah, how beautiful!" exclaimed Paula, as she came out on deck from the saloon with Mercedes, Cora, and Lady Maud. "Look; look," she continued, gazing from east to west and west to east again.

The dinner was an artistic triumph. Mercedes had taken her father at his word, and there was nothing, solid or liquid, placed on the long broad table in the *Isola's* saloon which was not of the choicest that taste and skill could select or money buy. Never, even under the blue skies of the Playground of Europe had such a well-pleased company sat down to such an entirely delightful feast.

Thanks mainly to Lady Medcalf-Mears' selective genius the guests harmonised not only with each other but each with all, a result which is admittedly the highest triumph in the gentle art of entertaining. Mercedes, with her youth and her beauty, and her piquante, half foreign manner, suited the circumstances to a marvel, and so she made a perfect hostess. Her father somewhat astonished those of his guests who only knew him as the coldly-calculating, ruthless despot of finance by playing the host with such a modestly genial courtesy that even Kesteven himself began to speculate as to his possible reasons for this new development of character.

Coffee was served on deck about fifteen minutes after the ladies left the table, and when the guests came up they found that yet another transformation had taken place. The little floating fairyland which they had left growing dim in the fading light of the sunset was now glowing in the diffused shimmer of hundreds of tiny electric lights. Chains and wreaths of them hung fore and aft from the great pole-masts and the shrouds. Hundreds more of them glowed half-hidden among the flowers and amidst the gently waving fans of the palm trees. Only about the stage there were no lights visible. It was lit up as though it possessed a luminous atmosphere of its own.

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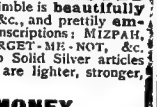

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7/6 **Curb Chain Bracelet,** with paddock and safety chain; 18-carat, rolled gold (stamped and guaranteed), in velvet case.

6/9 **Brooch;** very handsome 18-carat rolled gold, 3 swallows in flight; set lovely turquoise and pearls in case.

21/- **Lady's** solid gold **Keyless Watch,** jewelled in 10 rubies, beautifully engraved case, splendid time-keeper; 10 years' written warranty; week's free trial.

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The land was already fading away into a dim, blue-grey haze, for during dinner the engines had been started at "dead slow" and the *Isola* had been slipping away seaward for more than a couple of hours without any of the guests being in the least aware of it, so smoothly worked the mighty engines which, at need, were capable of driving her more than forty miles an hour through the water.

Conversation over the coffee and cigarettes was somewhat scrappy and desultory. The subtle spell of a perfect dinner and the magical influence of the almost unearthly surroundings combined against the spoken word and in favour of the unspoken thought.

"No, no," his Highness of Warschaua murmured when he could keep silence no longer, and leaning in his chair towards Cora, "you are right, my dear. This exquisite half hour has not been for talking, no, not even to you. This is not a time to say anything with the lips. It is for the eyes and the souls of men and women to come together in silence—is not that so?"

"Yes," she laughed softly, laying her cheek on her hand and looking into his eyes, "and yet you are talking—but so nicely that I suppose I'll have to forgive you. Ah, see. There's Mr. Staunton taking Madame de Ronski to the piano. We are going to begin. Shall we go and find our seats?"

The stewards had cleared the space in front of the stage and filled it again with low chairs of Russian wicker covered with costly furs and furnished with cushions. Mercedes, as hostess, took the centre chair of the first row. Cora and the Grand Duke sat on her right, and Lady Maud and Iddison on her left. Lady Medcalf-Mears sat between his Highness and Staunton, Kesteven had devoted himself for the time being to Mrs. Corton Vansuyler, a brilliant and wealthy widow hailing from Philadelphia, who would not have had any insuperable objection to joining her millions to his, and the rest of the company arranged themselves according to their convenience and their affinities.

There was, of course, no formal programme. Staunton had decided that it should be an entirely "go as you please" affair. Mercedes and Cora had got a list of promises to "do something" and the order of the doing was left entirely to the performers.

As soon as everyone was seated, Madame de Ronski's fingers rippled over the keys and the Intermezzo from "Cavalleria" instantly hushed the murmur of conversation. There was no applause, as the last chords died away into silence because all the performers had asked Mercedes to let it be understood that none was desired, but people looked at each other and whispered their approval of the perfect rendering.

The hush fell on the company again as de Ronski came out of the smoking-room with his violin and his wife struck the opening chords of the Kreutzer Sonata.

No man with a reputation to keep had ever played before a more cultured and critical audience, and never had an audience heard the diabolical melody made to sound so entirely devilish. Men held their breath and gripped the arms of their chairs hard. Some of the women sat up straight and stared wild-eyed at the magician who was waking such evil echoes in their souls. Others shrank back into the depths of their big chairs and covered their eyes with their hands.

Staunton, to one side of whose nature music spoke as no other form of speech could, listened rigid with clenched teeth, and when the spell was lifted and silence came, he said in his soul:

"I wonder if our friend suspects anything, and whether he means that as a warning. It sounded very like it."

There was then a little interlude. As a matter of fact the audience looked as if they wanted it, so intense had been the strain of following the marvellously interpreted theme.

Then Mercedes answered an inquiring look from Madame de Ronski, who was still seated at the piano, and went on to the stage. She stood in the centre facing the audience but looking up to the sky so that her eyes shone strangely in the moonlight. There came from the piano a sadly plaintive and yet exquisitively sweet melody which only her father and Madame de Ronski had ever heard before, and then she began to sing in Spanish the once famous and now almost forgotten "Lament of the Moor."

As the song drew near to its end, Staunton clenched his teeth tighter and said again in his soul:

"Why did she choose that to sing? It is almost as bad as the Sonata."

He got up from his chair and walked away forward under the bridge.

For the moment even his inflexible purpose seemed to waver and his iron will was almost on the point of melting in that liquid flood of melody which had welled up from the warm depths of his darling's soul.

If she could only have come to his side just then and spoken to him as she had sung, everything might have been changed, but she had gone back to her seat and he heard the opening chords of the Marseillaise ring out from the piano.

He knew what was coming and went back to his seat.

Paula was standing in the middle of the little stage.

She paused for a moment and then the triumphant rhythm of the Marseillaise crashed out from the piano and the soldier's soul spoke again from her lips as she sang, her voice rising clear and high above the exulting tumult of the notes.

As the last defiant notes rang out his melting mood had passed completely away. The magic of the melody which had rung in ears of thousands of dying heroes had hardened his resolve into steel again. He got up and held out his hand to Paula as she came down from the stage and said in French:

"A thousand thanks, mademoiselle. That was magnificent. It was not only music, it was more, if that is possible."

Those of the audience who knew him were rather surprised to see Iddison get up next and borrow Cora's banjo. No one in the company had credited the quiet-spoken, reserved engineer with anything approaching a gift for entertaining, saving only Sister Janet who had heard him tinkle his banjo and half sing, half recite Kipling's "Soldier Ballads" to his accompaniment on the far-away veld.

When he went back to his seat Lady Maud put her hand on his arm and whispered:

"You dear. I had no notion you could do anything of that sort, and you did it perfectly. How did you learn it?"

"Oh, it comes to one out there, you know," he said a little awkwardly. "One has to do something to help the fellows through their troubles, and I thought it might be a bit of a change for them here."

"It was splendid," she replied, getting up, "and now it's my turn."

There was another interlude and then de Ronski came back with his violin.

In a few moments Paula had taken her father's place. Her mother turned away from the keyboard and looked into Mercedes' eyes until as though by some magnetic influence she drew her glance to hers and Paula began singing with all the strength of her soul and the sweetness of her voice:

"*When other lips and other hearts*——"

As she went on the echoing voices spoke louder and louder, and with ever-increasing insistence until they filled the long vacant chamber in the dwelling-place of Mercedes' soul. She sat still as though the magic of the old-familiar song had turned her into stone, until as the sweet, long-drawn notes of the last refrain—

"*Then you'll remember me*,"

went soaring up into the silence from the singer's lips, she started to her feet, clasped her hands over her eyes, and cried with half a sob and half a laugh in her voice:

"Yes, yes, I do remember now. Wilfrid, dearest, where are you?"

And then she fell back on to her chair, covered her face with her hands, and began to sob as though some great sorrow had suddenly fallen upon her.

(Another long instalment of this serial next week.)

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Conducted by CYNTHIA.

[*In this page are answered any letters from readers dealing with affairs of the heart, tangles in domestic life, or points of etiquette. All communications must be addressed to Miss Cynthia Hamilton, c/o the Editor of* SHORT STORIES.]

Beware of Friends!

THE old saying, "Don't introduce your donah to a pal," has again proved its truth in the case of "B. C." He was "keeping company" with a girl for nine months, when he introduced her to two of his supposed best friends. On the sly, at different times, they have both asked her to give him up, and go with them. As the young lady likes him, she said she would not. He doesn't know whether or not to pay them out in the old English fashion.

* * * * *

The best way to pay them out, "B. C.," is to let them see that you and the girl are not to be separated by evil speakers. The "old English" method is not to be advised in any case, unless it is provoked by deliberate insult or injury. The best guard against slander is to ignore it, and let facts speak for themselves.

A Hapless Colonial.

"T. A. C." is in a strange position. He is an Australian, and has been in England for two months. In his own Colony he always got on well with the girls, but here he does not seem so fortunate. All the nice girls, he says, seem to be booked. How, he asks, can he get on with British girls?

* * * * *

Your complaint is quite unusual, "T. A. C." My idea is that Colonial men usually attract British girls more than the home variety. Their manners are more open and frank, they are usually sportsmen and manly, and, in appearance, can give the home-bred man many points. If you fail with the girls, it must be very hard luck on your part, or perhaps sheer incapacity to make yourself understood by them. Try again, very hard, in the Colonial fashion, and if it doesn't succeed, well, I fear there must be something a bit wrong about you.

Dances with the Other Girl.

"JESSIE" writes: "A friend of mine is in love with a young fellow. Sometimes he is very attentive to her, but at others he is just the reverse. They meet twice a week at a dancing class, every Monday and Friday. On Tuesday nights he has every other dance with my friend, but on Fridays he does not come near her, but dances all the time with one other girl. What do you understand this to mean?"

* * * * *

I think there is very little doubt that he is more in love with the Friday girl than with your friend, or why should he give himself up entirely to her on that night, whereas he only spares half his dances for your friend on Tuesdays? There is, though, just the bare possibility that the Friday girl dances very well, and that the young man gives her the preference on that account. Off-hand, though, I certainly advise your friend not to give her heart to a young man who is evidently not very deeply in love with her.

Cousins' Love.

"I AM going out with a cousin," writes "A." "Our names are the same, but she is three years older than I My mother does not like my going with her. We have been together for two years. Is there any reason why we should not be lovers?"

* * * * *

Marriages between cousins are not, of course, always wise. But the exception proves the rule, when there is any very strong affection. However, be sure that you have a real love for her, and not merely a feeling of friendship. Companionships between cousins are often very delightful, but should not be mistaken for the affection of lovers.

An Awkward Vow.

"DORIS" writes: "I am eighteen, and a short time ago had two young men friends. I saw a lot of one of them, but he was jealous of the other and used to tease me about him. Once he made me so angry, that I made a vow never to speak to him again, but since then I have grown to like him much better, and he has asked me to walk out with him again. But I do not like to break my vow, so would you kindly tell me the best thing to do?"

* * * * *

Vows are very silly things to make, "DORIS," at eighteen. They are consoling enough at the time, but one regrets them afterwards—and rarely keeps them. If you really do like the young man—and I imagine you do—give him another chance, and go with him again. Perhaps he will have now learnt not to be too much of a tease.

A Quick Lover.

"A SHORT time ago," says "H. M. R.," "I met a widower who told me he wished to meet with a steady, respectable woman, with a view to marriage. A short time after he wrote to me saying he should like me, and wanted me to write to him. I did so, and in reply he said he wished me to become engaged to him. How would you answer the letter? I like him fairly well."

* * * * *

It seems rather sudden to ask a lady to become engaged after one meeting and two letters. He is evidently a man of little ceremony. Perhaps he is the better for that. Anyhow, "H. M. R.," I should not advise you to marry on such slender acquaintance. Tell him you wish to know him better before committing yourself, and then make up your mind after future meetings.

Jack's Predicament.

WHEN "JACK" was in the country during the summer, he met a girl who made herself very agreeable to him. Being of a gallant disposition, "JACK" thought it only right to return the sentiment, so took her out a lot and was generally very nice. But he did not feel anything else towards her than mere amiability. "JACK" however, rather fears she misunderstood his attentions, for she has now written asking him to meet her in London, evidently with a view to developing their friendship. Should "JACK" take any notice of the request, seeing that he does not himself care for her at all?

* * * * *

If "JACK" was amiable and friendly with the girl in the country, I see no reason why he should not be the same in London. I do not see why he need commit himself to seeming to be in love with her. Certainly let him meet the girl in London, and make himself as agreeable as before. She would be offended if he refused to do so.

Cynthia

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